Anticipating Rage Bait: Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gustave Le Bon, Hannah Arendt, Guy Debord

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In 2025, the term “rage bait” crystallized something many people already felt: our media systems appear optimized to provoke outrage, monetize attention, and keep publics in a state of low-grade fury. While the technologies are new, the underlying dynamics are not. Long before social platforms and algorithms, a series of acute observers warned that modern societies were drifting toward precisely this condition: anonymous crowds stirred by impersonal media, resentment converted into a resource, and representation slowly replaced by spectacle. This paper reads “rage bait” retrospectively through the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gustave Le Bon, Hannah Arendt, and Guy Debord. Each of these thinkers grasped a different facet of the problem: the phantom public and leveling of individuality; the economy of ressentiment; the psychodynamics of crowds; the vulnerabilities of mass society under propaganda; and the colonization of life by images. Taken together, they form a prehistory of the rage-bait ecosystem. By placing their diagnoses in dialogue with contemporary digital infrastructures, the paper argues that today’s incentive structures were not only foreseeable but, in some respects, structurally inevitable. The goal is not nostalgia for a lost past, but clarity about how deeply our current predicament is rooted in modernity’s unresolved tensions.

Keywords: rage bait, social media, public sphere, crowd psychology, ressentiment, propaganda, spectacle, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, Debord, mass society, digital capitalism, attention economy, outrage, leveling, phantom public, Society of the Spectacle, epistemic crisis.

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1. Introduction: Rage Bait as Symptom of the Present

The phrase “rage bait” names something at once banal and disturbing. On the surface, it refers to a familiar pattern in contemporary media: posts, headlines, and videos crafted to provoke anger, moral outrage, or disgust, because those emotions are especially effective at driving clicks, shares, and comments. At a deeper level, however, the term gestures toward a broader cultural condition. Many people now experience public life as a sequence of provocations: each morning’s feed offers a new offense, a fresh scandal, a carefully packaged example of stupidity or malice to be denounced. The emotional tone of “being informed” shifts from curiosity and concern toward permanent indignation.

This paper treats rage bait not simply as a recent linguistic innovation but as a symptom of the current stage of modernity. The techniques are novel in their technological implementation, but the underlying dynamics are not. Well over a century before social media, keen observers of modern societies warned about the dangers of anonymous crowds, impersonal media, ressentiment, mass propaganda, and spectacle. Søren Kierkegaard saw in “the public” and “the press” an irresponsible phantom capable of hollowing out genuine individuality. Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed a culture built on reactive resentment, in which the powerless find compensation in moral condemnation. Gustave Le Bon analyzed the psychology of crowds, noting their suggestibility and volatility. Hannah Arendt traced how loneliness and mass society made people vulnerable to propaganda and fictitious worlds. Guy Debord argued that advanced capitalism replaces lived experience with images that manage and pacify spectators.

Rage bait, as a specific pattern in today’s attention economy, can be read as a convergence of these earlier diagnoses. It is where crowd psychology meets ressentiment, where spectacle fuses with propaganda, where the phantom public is continuously agitated by streams of images and stories designed to keep it reactive. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct this prehistory, not out of antiquarian interest, but in order to bring a measure of clarity to the present. If rage bait feels inevitable, these thinkers help us see why. If it feels intolerable, they also help us ask what might have to change, in our institutions and in ourselves, for public life to be something other than a managed cycle of outrage.

1.1 Defining rage bait and its contemporary manifestations

Rage bait, in its narrow sense, can be defined as content deliberately crafted to elicit anger, moral outrage, or disgust, usually for the purpose of maximizing engagement. The content is not merely “provocative” in a general way, nor simply partisan or critical. It is optimized for affective impact: it seeks to ensure that viewers feel a jolt of indignation strong enough to comment, share, quote, or watch to the end. Whereas traditional propaganda aims to persuade, convert,

or mobilize in service of a coherent program, rage-bait content may or may not care about persuasion at all. Its primary metric of success is measurable reaction.

Several characteristic features tend to cluster around rage bait. The first is moralization. Stories are framed explicitly in terms of right and wrong, good and evil, heroes and villains. A minor misstep becomes evidence of deep corruption; a clumsy phrasing becomes proof of hidden malice. The second is simplification. Complex situations are reduced to symbolically loaded episodes that can be consumed and judged in seconds. Nuance, ambiguity, and context are stripped away in favor of crisp emotional cues. The third is anticipatory defensiveness. Rage-bait posts often include pre-emptive framing that assumes bad faith in anyone who might disagree, escalating potential conflict in the comment section before it even begins.

Contemporary manifestations of rage bait take many forms. There are headlines crafted around a single incendiary phrase, designed to trigger the sensibilities of a specific demographic. There are short video clips ripped out of context, curated to show someone at their most foolish, offensive, or hypocritical. There are threads and posts that gesture at some vague but menacing trend, often accompanied by a phrase like “no one is talking about this.” There are manufactured culture-war skirmishes over esoteric topics that suddenly dominate attention because they provide a clear occasion for outrage.

Rage bait is not confined to explicitly political content. It appears in purportedly apolitical entertainment, celebrity gossip, brand marketing, and interpersonal drama. Influencers, independent commentators, and mainstream media outlets all participate to varying degrees. In many cases, the individuals producing such content rationalize it as “raising awareness,” “speaking hard truths,” or “calling out injustice.” The same artifact can function both as sincere moral critique and as outrage-optimized media asset, and the line between the two is often blurry even to its creators.

Crucially, rage bait is not only a matter of individual intention; it is a systemic phenomenon. Platform architectures and recommendation systems are calibrated toward engagement metrics. Posts that succeed in eliciting strong emotions are rewarded with visibility and growth. Over time, creators learn, consciously or not, what sorts of framing, topics, and tonalities generate the best numbers. Even those who do not think of themselves as “rage baiting” are pulled in that direction by a simple feedback loop: certain styles of expression and story selection reliably “work.” In that sense, rage bait is less a discrete tactic and more an emergent pattern in the symbiosis between human psychology and algorithmic incentives.

1.2 From clickbait to outrage incentives: a brief media trajectory

To understand why rage bait has become so prominent, it helps to situate it within a longer trajectory of media economics and design. A simplified story might begin with the early

commercial internet, in which advertising-supported websites competed primarily for page views. In that environment, “clickbait” flourished: headlines designed to maximize curiosity and ambiguity, promising surprising facts, shocking revelations, or emotionally resonant stories if the user simply clicked through. The logic was straightforward. Revenue was tied to impressions; impressions required clicks; therefore, any technique that increased the likelihood of a click was valuable.

As social media platforms rose to prominence, the relevant metrics shifted. Instead of merely attracting clicks from search engines or bookmarks, content now circulated through social graphs and algorithmic feeds. Posts, videos, and articles had to compete within streams personalized to each user, and their success depended on additional forms of engagement: likes, shares, comments, watch time. Curiosity alone was no longer enough. Content that provoked stronger emotions, especially anger and moral judgment, tended to generate more interaction. Disagreement, argument, and controversy kept users on the platform longer than calm agreement or dispassionate information.

Over time, platform algorithms learned from this behavioral data. Systems were trained, explicitly or implicitly, to surface posts that had historically driven engagement. At the same time, creators experimented. They tested different headline styles, thumbnail images, and narrative frames, observing what worked and discarding what did not. This co-evolution of algorithms and content producers gradually shaped the media environment into one that privileges affectively intense material. Outrage became not just a side effect, but a resource.

The trajectory from clickbait to rage bait can thus be seen as a shift in the affective profile of attention capture. Early clickbait relied heavily on curiosity and surprise: “You won’t believe what happened next.” Rage bait shifts the emphasis toward anger, contempt, and a sense of violated norms: “Look at what they are doing now.” Both forms share a willingness to manipulate, but rage bait adds a moral vector. It invites not just interest, but judgment. It does not merely want the viewer to see; it wants the viewer to take a side and feel superior or threatened.

This shift is reinforced by the broader political and cultural climate. In polarized societies, especially those experiencing economic insecurity, rapid technological change, and institutional mistrust, latent anxieties and resentments are easily activated. Media systems that optimize for engagement will inevitably discover that content tapping into those tensions performs exceptionally well. The result is a kind of spontaneous alignment between structural incentives and preexisting social fractures. Rage bait becomes the common currency of a media ecosystem built around attention as the principal commodity.

It is important to note that this trajectory is not linear or uniform. Different platforms, regions, and subcultures exhibit distinct patterns. There are countervailing trends toward long-form, thoughtful content and attempts at "slow media." Yet the overall picture is clear enough: as economic and technical pressures reward affective intensity and measurable interaction, outrage becomes a predictable attractor. Rage bait is the name given to that attractor when it is recognized from within.

1.3 Why revisit nineteenth and twentieth century critics now

Given that rage bait appears bound up with digital technologies and contemporary platform capitalism, it might seem natural to seek explanations primarily in recent developments: machine learning, social media business models, the smartphone, and so on. Those factors are certainly crucial. But they operate on a deeper terrain shaped by longer-term transformations in how individuals relate to one another, to media, and to power. The critics considered in this paper were among the first to map that terrain.

Kierkegaard, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, saw the emergence of "the public" as a distinct and troubling phenomenon: a diffuse, anonymous entity brought into being by newspapers and public opinion, yet lacking embodiment and responsibility. He worried that the press could produce a kind of fictional community in which everyone comments on everything and no one is truly committed. In such an environment, he argued, serious inwardness and genuine action become difficult. Rage bait can be read as a late descendant of this process: an intensification of the public's tendency toward cost-free talking and judging, now technologically amplified.

Nietzsche, a few decades later, explored the psychological underside of modern morality. He argued that in a world where many feel powerless, resentment becomes a generative force. Those who cannot act directly against perceived enemies find satisfaction in moral condemnation, inversion, and symbolic revenge. The pleasure of judging, shaming, and exposing others' faults is not a side effect but a central feature of this moral economy. Rage bait exploits this economy, offering a continuous supply of material onto which ressentiment can be projected and from which it can draw renewed energy.

Le Bon, writing around the turn of the twentieth century, focused on crowds. He described how individuals gathered into crowds tend to lose some of their capacity for critical reflection and become more suggestible, emotional, and impulsive. Simple images, slogans, and myths can move them more deeply than reasoned arguments. Social media can be understood as a technology that creates a perpetual, distributed crowd, with each user both isolated and yet immersed in a mass emotional environment. Rage bait functions as a stimulus tailored to such a crowd, designed to be easily understood, quickly felt, and widely propagated.

Arendt, in the mid-twentieth century, studied totalitarian movements and their use of propaganda. She emphasized the role of loneliness and uprootedness in making people susceptible to radical narratives that promise meaning and coherence. When the distinction between reality and fiction is destabilized, and when institutions lose credibility, people can become strangely indifferent to factual truth while still being highly responsive to emotionally charged stories. Rage bait thrives in this landscape, where the line between fact and fabrication is blurred, and where the primary question is no longer "Is this true?" but "Does this fit the feelings and narratives already in circulation?"

Debord, writing in the late 1960s, offered a critique of advanced capitalist societies as "spectacles" in which social relations are mediated by images. In his view, lived experience is increasingly replaced by representations, and people become spectators of their own lives and of politics. The spectacle, he argued, is not just a collection of images but a social relationship mediated by images. Rage bait appears, from this perspective, as a specialized form of spectacle: not just an image to be consumed, but a carefully staged scene of outrage designed to hold attention and guide affect within commodified channels.

Revisiting these thinkers is not a matter of retrofitting them with digital vocabulary or forcing them into anachronistic analogies. Rather, it is to recognize that the conditions enabling rage bait were already visible in embryo long before the internet. The rise of mass literacy, the expansion of print and broadcast media, the formation of anonymous publics, the experience of urban crowds, the spread of propaganda techniques, and the commodification of culture all preceded social networks. Today's rage-bait ecosystem is a technologically intensified expression of processes they were among the first to diagnose.

Bringing their insights into conversation with contemporary media allows for a richer understanding of what is at stake. It highlights that the problem is not merely one of "bad content" or "manipulative algorithms," but of deeper tensions in modern life: between individuality and crowd, action and spectatorship, responsibility and anonymity, truth and fiction, meaning and ressentiment. If rage bait is a symptom, these thinkers help us read the underlying disease. The rest of the paper will unpack their contributions in turn, and then return to the present with a composite view of why our public sphere so readily organizes itself around outrage, and what limited forms of resistance might still be possible.

2. Modernity, Mass Society, and the Question of the Public

Before rage bait becomes a recognizable pattern in digital media, there has to be something like a "public" for it to operate on. The familiar situation in which people wake up, check their feeds, and encounter a stream of stories about distant events and strangers is a late development in a

much longer transformation. That transformation begins with the spread of literacy and the growth of mass media, continues through the creation of anonymous publics, and culminates in what twentieth century theorists called mass society. The five thinkers considered in this paper each respond, in different ways, to this shift.

Modernity, in this context, means more than new technologies or political institutions. It refers to a structural change in how individuals relate to one another and to the world. Traditional forms of belonging, rooted in local communities, shared practices, and relatively stable hierarchies, increasingly give way to abstract relations: citizenship, audience membership, voting blocs, readerships. People who never meet can now act "together" by consuming the same news, reacting to the same events, and forming opinions about one another as members of categories rather than as concrete persons.

Rage bait presupposes this world. It assumes that anonymous individuals, scattered across territories yet connected through shared media, can be simultaneously addressed and affected by the same piece of content. It presupposes that these individuals are used to reacting to distant events and strangers and that their reactions can be aggregated, measured, and monetized. To understand why the rage-bait pattern is effective, one must first understand how the modern public came into being and what structural features it exhibits.

2.1 The rise of mass literacy, mass media, and anonymous publics

The emergence of mass literacy and mass media is one of the foundational shifts of the last few centuries. As more people learned to read and write, and as printing technologies became cheaper and more efficient, texts could circulate on a scale previously reserved for religious authorities and state bureaucracies. Newspapers, pamphlets, novels, and later magazines created shared horizons for disparate individuals. People who would never meet one another could nonetheless be addressed by the same editorial, moved by the same serialized story, or informed about the same political crisis.

Early newspapers did not simply report events; they also stitched together a sense of "we." The very idea that there is a body of people who ought to know about the day's developments, who can form opinions and discuss them in coffeehouses, taverns, and salons, depended on this infrastructure. The public is not a natural entity; it is an effect of communication technologies and institutions. It arises when a set of people comes to see itself, however vaguely, as an audience to the same stream of information, and when that audience is imagined as having some political or cultural weight.

At the same time, the expansion of urban life and industrial economies produced new forms of physical proximity without personal familiarity. Crowds filled streets, factories, and public gatherings. Individuals navigated spaces where they were surrounded by strangers, united only

by shared participation in systems of work, consumption, and communication. The tension between this physical crowd and the more abstract public becomes one of the defining themes for modern social thought. Both share a quality of anonymity: in neither case do participants know one another in the intimate ways that characterized traditional communities.

The notion of an anonymous public introduced new possibilities and dangers. On one hand, it allowed for unprecedented forms of solidarity and collective action. Citizens could be mobilized around shared causes, informed about distant injustices, and organized into movements. On the other hand, the same mechanisms allowed for manipulation and superficiality. People could be addressed as a mass, flattered or alarmed by narratives tailored to their perceived identity as "the people," "the nation," or "the silent majority."

As technologies evolved from print to telegraphy, radio, cinema, and television, the scale and immediacy of public formation intensified. Events could be narrated almost in real time; images and sounds could accompany words; leaders could speak directly into living rooms. Each medium brought its own biases and possibilities, but all contributed to the consolidation of mass audiences. The internet and social media, for all their distinctive features, extend this trajectory. They multiply channels, accelerate circulation, and collapse distance even further. Rage bait is a late expression of this process, a particular tactic made possible by the density and speed of contemporary media environments.

The anonymous public produced by mass literacy and mass media is thus both the precondition and the object of rage bait. It is a collection of individuals accustomed to being addressed as a group, habituated to feeling something about distant events and strangers, and reachable at scale through mediated communication. Without this infrastructure and habitus, the very idea of provoking a million people at once with a single headline or video would make little sense.

2.2 Structural features of "the public" that enable rage bait

To see why the public is so vulnerable to rage bait, it is helpful to consider several of its structural characteristics. These features were already noticed and criticized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although they have taken on new intensity in the digital age.

A first feature is anonymity. The public is composed of individuals who do not appear to one another in any concrete, embodied way. They consume content alone or in small groups, and they respond through mechanisms that abstract away their identities: letters to the editor, polls, comment sections, likes, shares. This anonymity loosens the usual restraints that arise when one faces another person directly. It becomes easier to judge, condemn, or ridicule when the targets are distant and vaguely defined. Rage bait takes advantage of this by offering low-cost occasions for strong moral reaction. The individual can express outrage without having to confront the consequences of that reaction in a face-to-face setting.

A second feature is asymmetry between those who speak and those who listen. In the modern public, a relatively small number of actors—editors, journalists, politicians, influencers, platform designers—have disproportionate power to set agendas and frame issues. Most people are in the position of recipients and reactors. They may have some means of feedback, but their individual voices are easily diluted. This asymmetry allows content producers to experiment with emotional triggers, refine their techniques, and, when necessary, disavow responsibility. In an environment where success is measured in aggregate metrics, the temptation to deploy rage-inducing frames is strong.

A third feature is fragmentation coupled with imagined unity. The public is often spoken of as if it were a coherent entity with a single will or opinion, yet in practice it is segmented by class, region, ideology, and subculture. Modern media both address this fragmented public as a whole and intensify its divisions. Rage bait often works by exploiting perceived lines of conflict—between generations, political parties, cultural groups, or identities. It presents stories in ways that affirm in-group righteousness and out-group depravity. The structural tension between an abstract public and its internal fractures provides fertile ground for such content.

A fourth feature is temporal compression. The public's attention is organized around cycles of news and novelty. Each day, sometimes each hour, new items compete for prominence. This constant turnover discourages slow reflection and encourages quick judgments. Rage bait relies on this velocity. It is designed to be processed rapidly and reacted to immediately. The logic of "keeping up" with events amplifies the pressure to respond, lest one fall behind in the flow of outrage and commentary that constitutes much of public life.

A fifth feature is the economization of attention. As media systems rely on advertising and, later, data-driven business models, human attention becomes a resource to be captured, measured, and sold. In this context, the public is valuable primarily as an aggregate of eyeballs and behavioral data. Content that holds attention, even through negative emotions, is attractive to those who profit from it. Rage bait is a predictable outcome of this incentive structure: anger and moral shock keep people engaged, returning, and interacting in ways that generate more data and more advertising opportunities.

These structural features are not simply accidental or malicious. They arise from the basic conditions of large-scale communication in complex societies. Yet they make the public highly susceptible to forms of manipulation that trade on outrage. When millions of relatively anonymous individuals, addressed through asymmetrical channels, organized by rapid news cycles, and treated as attention resources, encounter content explicitly crafted to trigger anger, the result is what we now call a rage-bait ecosystem.

2.3 Mass society as a shared backdrop for all five thinkers

The term “mass society” emerged in the twentieth century to name a constellation of developments: the weakening of traditional communities and intermediary institutions, the growth of large bureaucratic states and corporations, the spread of standardized culture, and the increasing reliance on mass media to coordinate social life. While their vocabularies and political orientations differ, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord each grapple with aspects of this transformation.

For Kierkegaard, the proto-mass society of his time appears as “the present age,” characterized by reflection, calculation, and leveling. The crowd and the public represent forms of togetherness that lack genuine passion and commitment. Individuals become spectators who comment on everything and do nothing, hiding behind anonymity and irony. The press is the mechanism that binds this phantom public, shaping its moods and opinions. Rage bait, viewed through this lens, is an extreme form of the same dynamic: a public perpetually stirred into reactive commentary, while deep inwardness and decisive action recede.

Nietzsche approaches mass society through the lens of morality and culture. He worries about the dominance of “herd” values, in which mediocrity and resentment set the tone. The mass man, as he sees it, prefers comfort, security, and the pleasure of judging others over genuine greatness or creativity. Public opinion becomes a force that flattens distinctions and punishes deviation. In such a context, the thrill of condemnation and exposure is a primary reward. Rage bait can be seen as an industrialized, technologically amplified mechanism for distributing the pleasures of herd resentment.

Le Bon’s notion of the crowd anticipates mass society’s emotional dynamics. In his account, individuals in crowds lose their conscious personality, becoming more suggestible, impulsive, and prone to extremes. They respond readily to images, myths, and simple slogans, and they are powerfully affected by examples of strong emotion in others. Although he writes about physical gatherings, his analysis translates eerily to mediated crowds. Social platforms create dispersed crowds that nonetheless exhibit similar traits. Rage bait functions as a stimulus tailored to such a crowd: it bypasses complex reasoning and speaks directly to shared fears and hostilities.

Arendt’s work on totalitarianism and modern society brings into focus the role of loneliness, isolation, and the breakdown of shared realities. She emphasizes that mass society is not simply a matter of numbers but of a particular kind of atomization. People are uprooted from traditional affiliations yet not integrated into meaningful new forms of association. In this condition, they become ripe for propaganda that offers coherent narratives and objects for their frustrations. Rage bait operates in a non-totalitarian context but exploits related vulnerabilities:

it offers simple stories about who is to blame, what is outrageous, and why "they" are dangerous or contemptible.

Debord's critique of the spectacle captures the culmination of these tendencies in late capitalist societies. For him, mass society is one in which social relations are increasingly mediated by representations. People know the world and one another largely through images and commodities. The spectacle is not a set of messages but a structure of experience in which passivity and separation are normalized. Rage bait appears here as a particularly profitable genre of spectacle: images and narratives of conflict, indignation, and scandal that keep spectators engaged while leaving underlying structures unchanged.

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate how mass society provides the shared backdrop for the phenomenon of rage bait. It is a society in which:

- Individuals are numerous, relatively anonymous, and often isolated.
- Their experience of public life is heavily mediated by mass communication technologies.
- Their emotions, especially resentment and anxiety, are easily mobilized.
- Their role is frequently reduced to that of spectators and reactors rather than active participants.
- Their attention has become a resource to be managed and exploited by institutions.

In such a society, the rise of media tactics that deliberately provoke outrage is less an aberration than a logical development. The five thinkers do not anticipate the details of digital platforms, algorithms, or viral content. They do, however, identify the structural and psychological conditions that make those developments intelligible. Rage bait is modern mass society looking at itself in the mirror of its own media and discovering that anger has become one of its preferred modes of self-relation.

3. Søren Kierkegaard: The Phantom Public and Leveling

Kierkegaard stands at an early point in the genealogy of rage bait because he is one of the first to diagnose the spiritual and ethical consequences of a mediated public. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen of newspapers and coffeehouse opinion, he already sees a world in which individuals are drawn out of concrete existence into a hazy realm of talk, reaction, and comparison. He worries less about censorship or overt propaganda and more about a subtler danger: that the press and the public will dissolve genuine individuality into a kind of abstract spectatorship. For him, the central contrast is between the single individual standing before God and the crowd, which he famously calls untruth.

In Kierkegaard's analysis, the crowd and the public are new kinds of collectivity. They are not concrete communities bound by shared practices and mutual recognition, but abstractions brought into being by newspapers and gossip. The danger is not merely that such collectives can be manipulated, but that they invite a way of being in which one comments on everything while standing nowhere in particular. A person can participate in debates, express opinions, and judge others, all from a position that requires no real risk or commitment.

From this vantage point, rage bait appears as a technologically amplified intensification of the tendencies Kierkegaard feared. The anonymous public that delights in scandal, outrage, and ironic detachment has migrated from the café and the printed feuilleton into global platforms and instantaneous feeds. The same structure holds: individuals are tempted to trade the difficult work of inwardness and responsible action for the easier pleasures of reacting to whatever the impersonal media mechanism serves up next.

3.1 The crowd as untruth: anonymity, irresponsibility, and mimicry

Kierkegaard's declaration that "the crowd is untruth" is not a simple denunciation of groups. He does not claim that any gathering of people is inherently false, or that community is impossible. His concern is with a particular form of collectivity that arises in modern societies: the crowd as an anonymous aggregation in which the individual's sense of responsibility is diffused and weakened. In such a crowd, no one is personally answerable for what is said or done, because the initiative appears to come from "everyone" and thus from no one.

Anonymity is central here. The crowd, as Kierkegaard criticizes it, lacks faces and names. It is an abstraction, a statistical entity more than a concrete assembly. When one acts "as part of the crowd," one feels authorized by numbers and shielded by indistinguishability. One can express harsh judgments, mockery, or even cruelty with a sense that it is not really "I" but "we" who are speaking. The crowd becomes a mask behind which the individual hides, reducing the inner tension between conscience and impulse.

This anonymity opens the door to irresponsibility. For Kierkegaard, truth is bound up with personal appropriation: to affirm something as true is to be willing to live by it, suffer for it, and be judged by it. In the crowd, by contrast, opinions are held lightly. One can say one thing today, another tomorrow, without feeling the contradiction, because the "speaker" is not a stable self but the fluid mass of public sentiment. The crowd has no memory and no conscience; it roars and falls silent, leaving no one accountable.

Mimicry follows naturally. The crowd's opinions are contagious. Individuals, uncertain of themselves, look sideways at what "everyone" thinks and feels. They imitate one another's reactions, borrow one another's indignations, and measure their own sincerity by the intensity of their visible participation. Intellectual and moral life becomes a matter of alignment with or

rebellion against prevailing currents, rather than of solitary wrestling with questions of meaning and duty.

In contemporary rage-bait environments, this dynamic is easy to recognize. Outrage spreads rapidly through networks of largely anonymous users. People join “pile-ons” against perceived offenders, share clips that confirm their group’s views, and issue harsh verdicts in comment sections, often under handles that disconnect their words from their offline identities. The more bodies rush in, the less any particular individual feels responsible. The strength of the reaction becomes its own justification: so many cannot be wrong. Kierkegaard’s insistence that truth resides with the single individual, not with the crowd, stands as a direct challenge to this mode of public existence.

3.2 The press as impersonal agitator and manufacturer of opinion

Kierkegaard’s critique of the press is closely tied to his diagnosis of the crowd. For him, the modern political press is not merely a neutral conduit of information. It is an institution that actively creates the public it purports to serve. By selecting topics, framing issues, and offering commentary, it shapes what people talk about and how they talk about it. Its tone tends toward irony, detachment, and a kind of knowing superiority. It encourages readers to be entertained and stimulated rather than existentially engaged.

One of his core objections is that the press speaks from nowhere. Articles and editorials are often unsigned or written under pseudonyms; even when authors are known, they speak in the name of an abstract “we” that blurs personal accountability. The press thus exemplifies the structural anonymity of the crowd at an institutional level. It has power without a clear face. It can wound, mock, and inflame, yet those affected cannot easily confront a responsible person and demand justification or retraction.

The press also manufactures opinion. By presenting certain views as obvious, widespread, or fashionable, it gently pressures readers to align themselves. It invites them into a conversation whose terms it has already set. Even skepticism can be commodified: one can feel sophisticated by rejecting certain pieties, but the frame within which rejection and acceptance are possible remains the same. The press thus becomes an impersonal agitator, forever stirring the public’s emotions and reflections without any corresponding demand for action or transformation.

In this light, rage bait appears as a descendant of the press’s capacity to excite and guide reaction. Today’s equivalents may not be editorial boards but a diffuse ecosystem of content producers, recommendation systems, and metrics dashboards. Yet the underlying mechanism is similar. A relatively small set of actors and algorithms decides which stories are worth seeing, crafts them in emotionally charged ways, and presents them under the banner of what “people

are talking about." Users, encountering this stream, experience their reactions as spontaneous and authentic, even as they follow paths laid down by opaque systems.

Kierkegaard's worry is not only that the press can mislead or misinform. It is that it habituates people to a specific posture toward reality: that of the observer whose primary role is to have an opinion. The world becomes a series of topics to think and talk about, rather than a field of responsibilities in which one must act. Rage bait intensifies this by offering an endless succession of offenses to be noticed and condemned, keeping individuals perpetually engaged at the level of reaction and commentary.

3.3 Leveling as the erasure of distinction, seriousness, and vocation

Among Kierkegaard's most striking concepts is that of leveling. He uses it to describe a process in modern society by which differences in passion, commitment, and existential seriousness are flattened. Leveling does not mean the achievement of genuine equality or justice. Rather, it names a kind of spiritual erosion in which what is remarkable, demanding, or exalted is reduced to the same plane as everything else. The heroic and the trivial become equally objects of detached commentary.

The public and the press are primary agents of leveling. When everything becomes subject to discussion by "everyone," the tone of that discussion tends toward irony and distance. The single individual who takes something with utmost seriousness appears ridiculous, extremist, or naive to a public that prefers to keep all topics at arm's length. Leveling thus punishes intensity and rewards moderate, shifting attitudes. One can flirt with convictions, but to live by them in a visible way is to invite ridicule.

This process erases distinction in several senses. It blurs the lines between genuine expertise and uninformed opinion, between hard-won insight and superficial familiarity. It also obscures the difference between speaking and doing. To denounce injustice in print or in conversation is easy; to set one's life on a course that addresses it concretely is costly. Under leveling, declarations and gestures stand in for actions. The capacity to comment appears as sufficient fulfillment of one's ethical and political obligations.

Leveling also undermines vocation. For Kierkegaard, a human life finds its truth when an individual embraces a specific task or calling with inward passion. This does not necessarily mean a prestigious career; it can be any form of existence in which one stands before God and others with integrity. The leveled age, however, encourages people to disperse their energies across countless topics. They become connoisseurs of other people's vocations, judging artists, politicians, and thinkers, but rarely commit to a path of their own.

Rage bait thrives on leveling and reinforces it. When every day brings a new scandal, outrage, or controversy, the distinction between matters of profound importance and trivial symbolic

battles is blurred. The same emotional register is mobilized for all. A minor misstep by a distant celebrity can attract the same intensity of reaction as a serious political abuse. Users are trained to respond passionately to whatever is placed before them, then to move on. The cycle itself becomes the object of loyalty; being "up to date" in one's indignation replaces sustained engagement with any particular cause.

In this environment, seriousness becomes suspect. Someone who refuses to participate in the outrage cycle, or who insists on deeper analysis, may be dismissed as out of touch or insufficiently concerned. Conversely, a constant state of performative anger can masquerade as depth. Kierkegaard's critique suggests that this is precisely the trap: leveling produces a world in which everything can be subject to intense reaction, yet almost nothing is approached with the quiet, sustained seriousness needed for genuine transformation.

3.4 From nineteenth century press to algorithmic outrage streams

The distance between Kierkegaard's Copenhagen and the contemporary internet is technologically vast, but structurally smaller than it first appears. The nineteenth century press created a public that lived through printed words; today's platforms create publics that live through scrolling feeds. The mechanisms differ, yet the patterns of anonymity, irresponsibility, and leveling persist and intensify.

In Kierkegaard's time, newspapers were relatively few, and their reach, though significant, was geographically limited. The pace of circulation allowed for some delay between publication and reaction. By contrast, algorithmic outrage streams operate in real time and on a global scale. A single clip or headline can reach millions within hours. The temporal compression amplifies the dynamics Kierkegaard observed. The shift from being a reflective observer to being a reactive participant is accelerated. There is less time for inward digestion, more pressure to "say something now."

Algorithmic curation adds another layer. Whereas the press of Kierkegaard's era still relied on editorial judgment and relatively stable readerships, contemporary platforms personalize content based on past behavior. The "public" is fractured into overlapping micro-publics, each receiving its own stream of rage-bait content calibrated to its sensitivities. Yet from another angle, these micro-publics are still manifestations of the same phantom public: aggregates of users whose attention and emotions can be steered by predictive models rather than by human editors.

Anonymity and pseudonymity are more pervasive as well. Users often operate under handles that detach their online personas from their offline identities. This can enable valuable forms of expression, especially for those in vulnerable positions, but it also lowers the threshold for irresponsible behavior. The structural temptation Kierkegaard warned about—the ease of

judging from behind the shield of the crowd—is now available to anyone with an account. The crowd no longer gathers on a street corner; it materializes in comment threads and trending hashtags.

The manufacturing of opinion, once the domain of newspapers, is now distributed across influencers, brands, bots, and recommendation algorithms. The line between genuine belief, strategic messaging, and automated amplification is difficult to discern. In such an environment, rage bait becomes both a tactic and an emergent property. Some actors consciously craft outrage-inducing content; others simply learn, through metrics, that certain tones and topics "work." The platforms themselves, indifferent to the meaning of the content they promote, optimize for engagement.

Despite these differences, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the single individual remains hauntingly relevant. His response to the present age is not a call for better content or more responsible journalism, though he might welcome both, but a call for individuals to reclaim their inwardness and responsibility. Rage bait, as a late form of the phenomena he described, confronts us with the same choice: to live primarily as members of a reactive, leveled public, or to insist on becoming persons who do not outsource their seriousness and judgment to the ever-churning stream.

By tracing the path from the nineteenth century press to today's algorithmic outrage streams, Kierkegaard's analysis helps us see that rage bait is not simply a glitch in technology or a moral failing of particular actors. It is a crystallization of tendencies built into the very structure of modern public life. Recognizing this does not solve the problem, but it clarifies its depth, and thus the scale of the transformations—both institutional and personal—that any genuine response would require.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche: Ressentiment and the Moralization of Anger

If Kierkegaard helps us see how modern publics become anonymous crowds bound by impersonal media, Nietzsche explains why those crowds so often burn with moralistic anger. His account of ressentiment, herd morality, and bad conscience amounts to an early theory of how powerlessness can generate a culture in which judging becomes a primary pleasure. Nietzsche does not speak of algorithms or platforms, but he describes a psychological economy that looks remarkably like the affective engine of rage bait: reactive anger that needs constant objects, moral narratives that convert weakness into imagined superiority, and a spectator stance that replaces action with commentary.

Nietzsche's analysis is uncomfortable precisely because it refuses to take moral outrage at face value. He is not impressed by the fact that someone is indignant about injustice, hypocrisy, or

cruelty. He wants to know what psychic needs that indignation satisfies, and what it does to the one who indulges it. In his view, modern morality has been shaped by a long "slave revolt" in which the powerless learned to derive satisfaction not from acting, but from condemning. Rage bait, as a contemporary media form, can be read as the industrialization of this dynamic.

4.1 Ressentiment as reactive, powerless, and endlessly productive

Ressentiment, in Nietzsche's usage, is more than simple resentment. It is a chronic, reactive stance in which one repeatedly revisits injuries, humiliations, or perceived slights, unable or unwilling to discharge the associated energy through decisive action. The ressentiment subject is not simply angry; he is stuck. Lacking the power to confront the source of his frustration directly, he turns to imagination, memory, and moral judgment as alternative arenas in which to regain a sense of agency.

This reorientation has far-reaching consequences. Instead of asking, "What can I build, create, or become?" the ressentiment subject asks, "Who is to blame?" The center of gravity shifts from the self's possibilities to others' faults. Over time, an entire worldview forms around this pattern. The powerful become villains by definition; the successful must be cheaters; the happy must be shallow or deluded. Every difference that might once have been experienced as a challenge to one's own growth is reinterpreted as an offense.

Ressentiment is reactive in at least two senses. First, it presupposes a prior wound or perceived slight. It is not spontaneous joy in creating or striving; it is a response to something that has already happened. Second, it lacks the capacity to translate that response into outward action. The energy that would, in a more robust individual, be channeled into confronting the source of frustration or changing one's circumstances, is instead turned inward and sideways. It fuels fantasies of revenge, elaborate systems of moral judgment, and a restless search for new confirmations of the existing narrative.

Importantly, Nietzsche sees ressentiment as endlessly productive. Once it becomes a dominant orientation, it does not require fresh, genuine injuries to sustain itself. It begins to generate its own objects. The ressentiment subject scans the world for episodes that can be read as insults, threats, or proofs of corruption. Even minor incidents can be magnified, interpreted, and revisited until they bear the weight of deep symbolic meaning. The satisfaction lies less in any concrete outcome than in the ongoing affirmation of the self as righteous victim and judge.

In the context of rage bait, this productivity is key. Rage-bait content offers a constant supply of material suitable for ressentiment's interpretive habits. Each new clip, headline, or quote can be taken as evidence of a hostile world, a degenerate culture, or a corrupt elite. The individual does not need to seek these examples out; they arrive, unbidden, in the feed. Ressentiment thus finds an inexhaustible external reservoir to match its internal drive for repetition.

4.2 Herd morality, bad conscience, and the pleasure of condemnation

Nietzsche's concept of herd morality names the prevailing system of values in modern societies, in which virtues like humility, compassion, equality, and selflessness are elevated, and more aristocratic virtues like excellence, pride, and creative self-assertion are suspect. He does not dismiss all "herd" values; his critique is directed at the psychological forces that gave rise to them. In his genealogy, it is ressentiment that revalues the traits of the weak and powerless as moral goods, while casting the traits of the strong as evil.

Within herd morality, there is a special role for condemnation. Because direct expression of power is discouraged—too aggressive, too arrogant—the herd finds an acceptable outlet in judging others. One can enjoy a sense of superiority not by achieving anything remarkable, but by detecting and denouncing violations of the moral code. The more strictly one polices others, the more firmly one reassures oneself of belonging to the "good." In this environment, moral outrage becomes a social currency and a personal comfort.

Bad conscience is closely related. For Nietzsche, it is what happens when the normal outward-directed instincts of a strong, active being are turned inward. In societies where direct aggression is constrained, the drive to dominate and overcome does not disappear; it is redirected against the self. Guilt, self-loathing, and self-surveillance grow in the space where outward action has been blocked. At the same time, the possibility arises of temporarily relieving this internal pressure by identifying with moral authority and punishing others, at least symbolically.

This mix of herd morality, ressentiment, and bad conscience creates a specific kind of pleasure: the pleasure of condemnation. To see someone exposed as hypocritical, corrupt, or offensive is to experience a double satisfaction. One feels, on the one hand, relief that one's own guilt is momentarily displaced: the focus is on their fault, not mine. On the other hand, one enjoys a borrowed sense of power: to join in the chorus of denunciation is to stand, briefly, on the side of the judges, not the judged.

Rage bait offers innumerable occasions for this pleasure. A politician makes an insensitive remark; a celebrity behaves badly; an ordinary person is filmed in a moment of rudeness or ignorance. These fragments are circulated with framing that invites moral interpretation. Users can participate in condemnation by liking, sharing, commenting, or simply savoring the disapproval. The apparatus of herd morality is thus fed and reinforced. One's sense of belonging to the "good people" is renewed not by sustained ethical practice, but by rapid cycles of outrage and judgment.

Nietzsche's suspicion is that such pleasures are ultimately corrosive. They eat away at the capacity for genuine affirmation, creativity, and courage. A culture that trains its members to

derive satisfaction primarily from identifying and denouncing the failings of others becomes, in his terms, decadent. Rage bait, interpreted through this lens, is not simply a regrettable media tactic; it is a symptom of a deeper moral configuration in which condemnation has become one of the most accessible and socially validated sources of enjoyment.

4.3 Will to power, transvaluation, and the problem of spectatorship

For Nietzsche, the will to power is not necessarily a desire for domination over others. It is, more broadly, the drive to expand one's capacities, to shape and overcome, to impose form on chaos. In its healthiest expressions, this will manifests as artistic creation, intellectual daring, courage, and self-overcoming. It is active rather than reactive, saying "yes" to life even in its difficulties. The problem with ressentiment and herd morality is that they divert this will into channels that require no risky engagement with reality.

Transvaluation of values is Nietzsche's name for the process by which one system of valuation is overturned and replaced by another. The original slave revolt in morality, in his story, was one such transvaluation: traits once admired (strength, nobility, self-confidence) were branded evil, while traits associated with weakness (humility, meekness, suffering) were exalted. He calls for a new transvaluation, one that would free individuals from the reactive fixation on guilt, revenge, and moral leveling, and reopen the space for affirmative, life-enhancing values.

In a culture organized around media and publics, however, there is a structural temptation to transform even the will to power into spectatorship. To be a spectator is to invest one's energies in observation, interpretation, and commentary rather than in direct creation or action. Spectatorship is not inherently bad; it can be contemplative and appreciative. But when it becomes the dominant mode of existence, the will to power is reduced to choosing sides, expressing opinions, and curating identities.

Rage bait encourages precisely this spectator stance. It offers a continuous parade of occasions to take a position: for or against, shocked or unimpressed, outraged or dismissive. The individual's sense of agency becomes tied to these micro-acts of alignment. One demonstrates one's values by reacting correctly to the latest offense. The will to power is thus siphoned into the management of one's public reactions within the moral economy of the herd.

From Nietzsche's perspective, this is a tragic misdirection. The same energy that could drive a person to transform their own life, challenge real structures of domination, or create new forms of meaning is dissipated in reactive commentary. Transvaluation, in the sense he calls for, becomes difficult when the horizon of possibility is crowded out by constant stimuli demanding immediate moral responses. In such an environment, even attempts at genuine revaluation can be subsumed into the spectacle, turned into yet another topic for rage or applause.

This raises the problem of spectatorship in its sharpest form: when does watching and judging become a substitute for living? Rage bait pushes the answer toward permanence. If the individual's primary engagement with the public world is through endlessly scrolling scenes of conflict and indignation, the space for active, risky, and creative modes of will to power shrinks. Even rebellion becomes aestheticized, consumed rather than enacted.

4.4 Rage bait as industrialized ressentiment and performative virtue

With Nietzsche's concepts in view, rage bait can be seen as the industrialization of ressentiment and the commodification of moral outrage. What begins as a psychological pattern—the reactive fixation on blame, the pleasure of condemnation, the herd's craving for affirmation—becomes, under contemporary media conditions, an economic and technical system.

Platforms do not need to understand Nietzsche to exploit ressentiment. They simply track which kinds of content generate the strongest engagement and adjust accordingly. Since moral outrage is highly engaging, content that triggers it is promoted. This does not require a conspiracy; it is the natural result of optimizing for attention within a population shaped by herd morality and bad conscience. The outcome is a feedback loop in which ressentiment finds ever more stimuli, and those stimuli are selected precisely because they gratify ressentiment's need for confirmation.

Performative virtue is the other side of this process. Rage bait invites users not only to feel anger but to display it. Expressing outrage publicly becomes a way of signaling moral alignment. By denouncing the right villains, sharing the right stories, and reacting with sufficient intensity, individuals can present themselves as good members of their moral community. The content itself may be ephemeral; what endures is the record of having been on the "right side" of each incident as it arose.

This performativity is not restricted to any particular ideology. Different groups have different lists of offenses and offenders, but the structure is similar. A story is framed as an outrage. Members of the group are expected to respond in the approved manner. Hesitation, nuance, or deviation can be read as complicity or betrayal. The rage-bait apparatus thus narrows the range of acceptable responses while giving individuals the illusion of robust moral agency.

Seen through Nietzsche's lens, this is a particularly subtle form of nihilism. Values are loudly affirmed, but their content is thin, anchored more in opposition than in positive visions of what is to be built. The moral self is defined by what and whom it hates. The will to power is expressed not in creating new possibilities, but in destroying reputations, reputing motives, and intensifying suspicion. The more the system rewards such behavior with visibility and approval, the more dependent individuals become on it for their sense of worth.

Rage bait as industrialized ressentiment is therefore doubly dangerous. It entrenches a psychological orientation that Nietzsche already regarded as harmful to individual flourishing, and it embeds that orientation in infrastructures that are difficult to escape. To withdraw from the rage-bait cycle can feel like a loss of moral participation, a retreat into irrelevance. To stay within it is to risk becoming the kind of person Nietzsche feared: someone whose primary relationship to the world is one of reactive condemnation.

At the same time, Nietzsche's insistence on transvaluation suggests that critique alone is insufficient. Recognizing rage bait as a machinery of ressentiment is only a first step. The more difficult question is what alternative forms of value, engagement, and affirmation might look like under contemporary conditions. In the context of this paper, that question will be taken up indirectly by considering how the other thinkers—Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord—analyze crowds, propaganda, and spectacle. Together with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, they help delineate the contours of a public life that has drifted toward permanent moralized anger, and perhaps hint at the minimal conditions under which something different could still be imagined.

5. Gustave Le Bon: Crowd Psychology and Suggestibility

If Kierkegaard anatomizes the "phantom public" and Nietzsche dissects the moral economy of ressentiment, Gustave Le Bon supplies a third crucial piece: the psychological dynamics of crowds. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, he is preoccupied with how individuals behave differently when submerged in a collective. For Le Bon, crowds are not simply many individuals in one place; they are a new psychological entity, characterized by heightened emotion, reduced critical thought, and extreme suggestibility. His analysis now reads, at times, as elitist and overgeneralized, but it captures structural features that map uncannily onto the behavior of users inside large-scale digital networks.

Le Bon is interested in the mechanisms by which crowds come to think, feel, and act as one. He emphasizes how anonymity, emotional contagion, and the role of leaders and symbols combine to produce moods and actions that none of the individuals, taken alone, would have adopted. In his framework, the individual's rational faculties are partially eclipsed; imagination and affective resonance take center stage. Rage bait, viewed in this light, can be understood as content specifically shaped to trigger crowd-like responses in dispersed publics: it is engineered to bypass deliberation, amplify emotional contagion, and align users around simple images and slogans.

5.1 The crowd as emotional, impulsive, and intellectually reduced

Le Bon's starting point is the observation that individuals within crowds tend to exhibit traits they might normally restrain. He describes the crowd as emotional and impulsive, prone to

swings from enthusiasm to fury, from adoration to hatred. The ordinary checks imposed by shame, fear of judgment, or reflective thought are weakened. People feel less personally responsible and more carried by a collective momentum.

This transformation, in his account, involves a kind of regression. The crowd operates at a more primitive psychological level than the individuals who compose it. Rational analysis, nuanced evaluation, and long-term planning recede. What remains is a heightened sensitivity to immediate stimuli. The crowd reacts to what is vivid, striking, and emotionally charged; it is indifferent to what is subtle, complex, or abstract. Le Bon speaks of a lowering of intellectual level: sophisticated distinctions are flattened, and crude binaries take their place.

In this environment, emotion becomes the primary medium of communication. Arguments fail where images succeed. A crowd is moved not by a carefully reasoned case but by scenes that evoke fear, anger, pride, or hope. Once a mood is established, it can be remarkably resistant to correction. Facts that contradict it are dismissed or reinterpreted; only new, equally powerful emotional stimuli can break its hold.

Rage bait content is tailored to this emotional, impulsive, and reduced register. It usually eschews detailed argument in favor of vivid, easily grasped narratives. A short video clip showing a perceived offense, a screenshot of an inflammatory statement, a cropped photograph that suggests disrespect: these are typical instruments. They are not designed to sustain scrutiny but to provoke immediate reaction. The intellectual complexity of the underlying situation—context, motives, constraints—is often absent or actively suppressed.

From a Le Bon perspective, the danger lies in the habituation of populations to operating primarily in this mode. When individuals repeatedly participate in crowd-like reactions mediated by digital platforms, they may come to rely less on their slower, more reflective capacities. Public discourse then tilts toward the emotionally obvious and away from the intellectually demanding. Rage bait reinforces this tilt by consistently rewarding the quickest and strongest reactions.

5.2 Contagion, imitation, and the power of simple images

Le Bon places great emphasis on contagion. In a crowd, feelings and ideas spread rapidly and often uncritically. A single cry, gesture, or act can set off waves of imitation. Individuals, seeing others behave in a certain way, feel licensed or compelled to follow. This is not always conscious; it can operate beneath the threshold of articulated thought. The crowd becomes a medium through which emotions propagate almost like a physical force.

Imitation is closely tied to this contagion. For Le Bon, humans are deeply imitative creatures, and crowds bring this trait to the fore. When individuals perceive a certain emotional tone or attitude as dominant, they are inclined to adopt it, especially in situations of uncertainty. The

fact that others seem to be outraged, afraid, or ecstatic is itself a reason to feel similarly. The content of the idea is less important than the evidence that "everyone" believes it.

Simple images are the most effective vehicles for contagion and imitation. Le Bon notes that crowds think in terms of images rather than concepts. Abstract ideas must be translated into concrete pictures, symbols, or stories to have any real impact. Nuanced analysis is ineffective; what moves the crowd are vivid representations that compress complex issues into a single scene. An image of a flag burning, a statue being toppled, a crying child, or a triumphant leader can carry immense emotional weight, far exceeding that of any textual explanation.

Rage bait relies precisely on this triad: contagion, imitation, and simple images. A video of a confrontation on a train, a clip of an official saying something tone-deaf, a still image of a product with a controversial slogan—all are designed to be instantly legible and emotionally potent. Once such content begins to spread, users see not only the original artifact but also the reactions of others. The comment count, the tone of replies, the number of shares signal that outrage is the appropriate response. Emotional contagion piggybacks on platform metrics.

Imitation shows up in the repeated phrases, tropes, and stock reactions that accompany rage-bait episodes. Certain rhetorical habits become scripts: accusations of betrayal, declarations that "this is who they really are," calls for cancellation or boycott. Users learn these scripts by watching them performed and rewarded. Over time, they may find themselves deploying them automatically. The power of simple images, in this context, is intensified by the speed and scale of digital circulation. What might once have stirred a physical crowd in a square now affects millions across continents.

Le Bon's analysis warns that once contagion and imitation become the dominant modes of public response, it becomes extremely difficult to introduce corrective complexity. A more accurate, less inflammatory account of an incident may circulate later, but it lacks the vivid immediacy of the original image. The crowd has moved on. Rage bait exploits this asymmetry: emotionally powerful images enjoy a first-mover advantage that more nuanced content is hard-pressed to overcome.

5.3 Leaders, symbols, and the manufacture of mass passions

For Le Bon, crowds do not spontaneously organize their feelings and actions. They require leaders, even if those leaders are temporary and emerge from within. The leader of a crowd is not necessarily a formal authority figure; he or she is someone who articulates, amplifies, and directs the diffuse emotions of the group. Charisma, decisiveness, and the ability to deploy resonant symbols are key.

Leaders, in his account, make heavy use of simple affirmations and repeated slogans. They do not persuade by argument but by asserting, insisting, and dramatizing. Their power lies in giving

form and direction to the crowd's existing dispositions, crystallizing vague anxieties or hostilities into focused passions. In doing so, they often rely on symbols: flags, emblems, personified enemies, or heroic narratives. These symbols condense many associations into a single object that can be loved, hated, or feared.

The manufacture of mass passions, then, is a cooperative process between leaders, symbols, and the responsive crowd. Once a symbol becomes charged, it can be mobilized repeatedly. A single word, image, or gesture can summon an entire complex of emotions and predispositions. Leaders can modulate these passions, turning them toward different targets as needed, but the fundamental repertoire is limited: pride, fear, anger, hope, resentment.

In contemporary digital environments, the role of leaders and symbols persists, though it is distributed across many actors. Influencers, pundits, politicians, and activists function as crowd leaders in Le Bon's sense. They frame events, assign meaning to images, and provide slogans through which followers can express alignment. Rage bait often originates or gains momentum when such figures highlight a particular episode as emblematic of broader conflicts.

Symbols, too, are abundant. Hashtags, memes, and recurring phrases act as contemporary equivalents of banners and emblems. A single hashtag can evoke a whole narrative of grievance or virtue. Memes compress stories into reusable images that can be adapted to new situations while preserving their affective charge. Rage bait frequently utilizes these symbolic resources, linking specific incidents to established narratives so that existing passions can be easily activated.

Le Bon helps us see that rage bait is not merely random provocation; it is often integrated into ongoing symbolic battles. Content creators and amplifiers, consciously or not, act as crowd leaders, selecting which episodes to elevate, how to frame them, and which symbols to attach. The passions that result are not uniquely digital; they belong to an older repertoire of mass psychology. What has changed is the speed, granularity, and persistence with which they can be manufactured and maintained.

5.4 Social media as a permanent, globalized crowd in session

Le Bon wrote primarily about physically co-present crowds: people gathered in streets, assemblies, theaters, or demonstrations. Social media platforms create something he could not have imagined: a permanent, globalized crowd that is always in session. Individuals may be geographically dispersed and never see one another's faces, but they are nonetheless bound into a shared psychological field by algorithms, interfaces, and synchronized rhythms of attention.

This digital crowd has several distinctive features. First, it is continuous. Where physical crowds disperse, the online crowd persists. There is always someone awake, reacting, posting, and

sharing. Emotional waves can therefore overlap and reinforce one another across time zones. Rage-bait episodes do not necessarily have neat beginnings and endings; they can flare up, fade, and be rekindled when new angles or participants appear.

Second, the digital crowd is multi-layered. Users simultaneously belong to overlapping sub-crowds organized around topics, identities, and platforms. One might be part of a fandom crowd, a political crowd, and a professional crowd, each with its own triggers for outrage and its own influencers. Rage bait can propagate across these layers, sometimes mutating as it moves from one context to another, but often preserving a core emotional script.

Third, the digital crowd is measured and managed in ways physical crowds never were. Platforms track engagement, optimize content distribution, and adjust recommendation algorithms based on real-time data. This means that the emotional state of the crowd is not only emergent but also engineered. Content that produces the hallmarks of crowd reaction—rapid sharing, intense commenting, polarized responses—is selectively amplified. The crowd becomes, in part, a product of the systems designed to monitor and exploit it.

From a Le Bon perspective, social media therefore represents the institutionalization of crowd psychology. The conditions that he saw as occasional—special gatherings, exceptional moments—are normalized. People conduct much of their informational and social life in an environment that constantly evokes crowd-like dynamics. Rage bait is one of the most visible expressions of this normalization. It is the recurring moment when the digital crowd visibly coalesces around an image, a story, or a symbol, displaying the emotional volatility and suggestibility Le Bon described.

The globalized nature of this crowd has ambiguous implications. On one hand, it allows for unprecedented solidarity and awareness; injustices that would once have remained local can become matters of worldwide concern. On the other hand, it multiplies the opportunities for misdirected or disproportionate rage. An incident that might once have elicited a small circle of indignation can now be subjected to millions of glances, each carrying its own predispositions and scripts.

Reading social media as a permanent crowd in session clarifies why rage bait feels so ubiquitous and exhausting. It is not just that there is more content; it is that the very architecture of our shared informational spaces favors stimuli that can trigger and coordinate crowd responses. Le Bon's early, often pessimistic reflections on crowd psychology gain new relevance here. They suggest that any serious attempt to mitigate the harms of rage bait cannot be limited to content moderation or individual self-control. It must also grapple with the fact that our dominant communication systems are built to keep the crowd alive, attentive, and emotionally primed.

6. Hannah Arendt: Loneliness, Propaganda, and Mass Man

With Arendt, the focus shifts from crowds and ressentiment to the inner condition of individuals in mass society. Where Le Bon describes how people behave when fused into a crowd, Arendt asks what kind of life leaves people so ready to be captured by totalizing narratives. Her answer centers on loneliness, uprootedness, and the gradual erosion of a shared world of facts. Totalitarian movements, in her analysis, do not merely lie to people; they first destroy the structures that make reality jointly intelligible, and only then offer a substitute world in which their stories feel more plausible than the confusing complexity of actual events.

Arendt writes with twentieth century totalitarian regimes in mind, not contemporary media platforms. Yet the structural patterns she traces—atomization, disorientation, the replacement of factual reality by coherent fictions, the transformation of citizens into "mass men"—provide an important backdrop for understanding why rage bait works. The platforms do not run concentration camps or demand unconditional ideological loyalty. But they operate in a landscape already marked by many of the vulnerabilities Arendt describes, and their business models inadvertently deepen some of them.

6.1 Loneliness and uprootedness as preconditions for manipulation

Arendt distinguishes loneliness from ordinary solitude. Solitude can be a condition of fruitful thinking, in which a person is metaphorically "two in one," holding an internal dialogue with themselves. Loneliness, by contrast, is the state in which that inner conversation breaks down because the person feels fundamentally disconnected from others and from a shared world. Loneliness is not merely being physically alone; it is the experience of being unable to rely on common sense, mutual recognition, or stable norms.

Modern mass society, in Arendt's view, generates loneliness on a large scale. Traditional social structures—family, village, guild, church, neighborhood associations—lose their binding power. People move to cities, change jobs, and find themselves surrounded by strangers. At the same time, the political sphere is hollowed out. Citizens have fewer real opportunities for meaningful participation; decisions seem to be made elsewhere and imposed from above. In this situation, individuals can feel both interchangeable and powerless, even when they are formally "free."

Uprootedness complements this picture. It means having one's bearings constantly disturbed: institutions that once seemed solid become untrustworthy, narratives that organized experience are discredited, social roles shift faster than people can adjust. The result is not just anxiety but a kind of disorientation about what counts as reality. If one's own experience no longer seems to match the official stories, and if there are fewer neighbors or colleagues one trusts enough to compare notes with, one becomes more susceptible to strong, simple narratives that promise to make sense of everything.

These conditions are fertile ground for manipulation because they weaken the ordinary protections afforded by common sense and shared life. A person who feels anchored in a community, engaged in meaningful work, and confident in some basic institutions is harder to sway by grandiose stories or manufactured outrage. A person who feels isolated, interchangeable, and ignored is more likely to grasp at whatever offers clarity, belonging, and emotional intensity.

Social media environments intersect with this background in complex ways. On the one hand, they promise connection and community, mitigating loneliness. On the other hand, they can deepen the sense of uprootedness by exposing users to a torrent of disconnected events, opinions, and crises. The more time is spent in feeds populated by strangers and semi-strangers, the less weight local, embodied relationships may carry. Rage bait, in this setting, acts as a powerful lure: it offers emotionally charged content that temporarily cuts through the fog of disorientation and says, in effect, "Here is something obviously outrageous. Here is a clear 'we' and a clear 'they'."

6.2 Fact, fiction, and the corrosion of a shared reality

A central theme in Arendt's work is the distinction between factual truth and interpretive or philosophical truth. Factual truths are specific, contingent realities: that a particular event happened, that a certain number of people died, that this person said those words at that time. They are fragile, because they depend on witnesses, records, and institutions willing to preserve and uphold them. They can also be inconvenient, because they may contradict preferred narratives or interests.

Totalitarian movements, in Arendt's account, are not content with bending facts to fit their ideology. They aim to destroy the very distinction between fact and fiction. They flood the space of public discourse with lies, half-truths, and mutually contradictory narratives, then impose a single overarching story that makes facts irrelevant. In such an environment, it no longer matters what actually happened; what matters is what fits the movement's internal logic. People become habituated to treating reality as malleable, something to be reshaped by will and belief rather than something that constrains them.

This corrosion of shared reality does not require a monolithic state. It can also emerge from a long process of institutional failure, partisan manipulation, and media fragmentation. When different groups inhabit different informational universes, with their own preferred sources, heroes, and villains, even basic factual claims become contested. The phrase "alternative facts," though coined in a specific context, captures a broader drift: facts are treated as expressions of allegiance rather than as common ground.

Rage bait intensifies this corrosion in at least two ways. First, it privileges emotionally satisfying narratives over empirically robust ones. A story that fits pre-existing suspicions, fears, or hostilities will spread more quickly than a careful, qualified account. Second, the speed and volume of rage-bait episodes discourage verification. By the time a correction or more nuanced explanation appears, attention has moved on. The impression left by the initial scandal remains, even if its details were false or distorted.

Arendt helps us see that the danger is not just individual gullibility. It is the gradual hollowing out of the shared world itself. When enough people come to treat stories mainly as triggers for emotion and alignment, rather than as attempts to describe reality, the space in which factual truth can matter shrinks. Rage bait feeds on this space and contributes to its contraction. It invites users to inhabit a world in which the primary question is not "Did this actually happen as presented?" but "Does this make me feel the right kind of outrage about the right kind of enemy?"

6.3 From totalitarian propaganda to softer forms of mass messaging

Arendt's paradigm case is totalitarian propaganda: the systematic effort to mobilize a population behind a radical project by reshaping its perception of reality. This kind of propaganda is explicit, disciplined, and centrally controlled. It demands loyalty, exploits fear, and often culminates in violence. It is tempting to contrast this sharply with the more diffuse, commercialized messaging of contemporary media and to conclude that the latter is relatively benign.

Yet Arendt also notes subtler forms of mass messaging that predate and outlast totalitarian regimes. Modern societies rely on public relations, advertising, and political spin to manage perceptions. These practices may not seek to erase reality entirely, but they do aim to frame it in ways favorable to particular interests. Citizens are treated less as participants in a shared project and more as audiences to be persuaded, distracted, or reassured.

The line between propaganda and marketing can be blurry. Both involve segmenting populations, identifying their desires and fears, and crafting messages that resonate. Both tend to simplify, dramatize, and strategically omit. The key difference lies in the ends pursued: totalitarian propaganda seeks total domination, whereas commercial messaging seeks profit and political messaging seeks votes or consent.

Rage bait sits uneasily within this spectrum. It is often neither centrally planned nor tied to a coherent program. Many actors participate in it: media outlets chasing clicks, influencers seeking growth, individuals venting or trolling, algorithmic systems surfacing what appears to "work." The result is not a unified ideology but a pattern of stimulation: publics are kept in a state of agitation, constantly supplied with reasons to feel angry, affronted, or morally superior.

From an Arendtian standpoint, this constitutes a softer but still serious form of mass messaging. It does not demand adherence to a single doctrine, but it does habituate people to certain modes of response. It encourages suspicion rather than trust, reaction rather than deliberation, alignment rather than judgment. It contributes to a background hum of instability in which more explicit propaganda, when it appears, can find easier purchase.

The key point is not that rage bait is itself totalitarian; it is that it participates in a broader reshaping of the public sphere in which the skills necessary for resisting totalitarianism—fact discrimination, conversation with diverse others, patient judgment—are weakened. As such, it belongs in the genealogy of propaganda that Arendt traces, even if it operates under different institutional and legal conditions.

6.4 Rage bait as a non-totalitarian but structurally similar apparatus

Putting these threads together, rage bait can be framed as a non-totalitarian apparatus that nonetheless shares structural features with the propaganda systems Arendt analyzed. It addresses individuals who are often lonely and uprooted, offers emotionally intense narratives that simplify a confusing reality, corrodes the status of factual truth, and organizes mass responses through repeated patterns of messaging.

Unlike totalitarian propaganda, rage bait does not emanate from a single center. It arises from decentralized interactions between users, platforms, and content producers. Yet the absence of central control does not mean the absence of structure. The economic logic of attention, the technical logic of recommendation algorithms, and the psychological logic of outrage combine to produce regularities. Certain kinds of stories are predictably elevated; others are predictably ignored. Certain emotional tones are rewarded; others are marginalized.

Arendt's category of "mass man" helps here. Mass man is not defined by class, education, or ideology, but by a certain readiness to abandon independent judgment in favor of identification with larger movements or narratives. He is not stupid, but he has become indifferent to factual nuance. He seeks relief from loneliness and insignificance in belonging to something bigger, even if that something is destructive or irrational. The rage-bait ecosystem does not create mass man, but it gives him abundant material and a stage.

Rage bait also mimics, in lighter form, the totalitarian promise of meaning. Totalitarian ideologies offer a comprehensive explanation of history and a clear division between friends and enemies. Rage bait offers micro-versions of this: each episode is framed as a small revelation of how "they" really are, a confirmation that the world is divided into good and bad actors along familiar lines. Users can drift from one such miniature revelation to the next, experiencing a fragmented but continuous sense of being on the side of truth against a hostile or corrupt world.

The apparatus is non-totalitarian in the obvious sense that it does not monopolize violence or demand unconditional devotion. People can opt out, switch platforms, or consume rage bait ironically. Yet the cumulative effect on the public sphere may still be profound. If enough individuals habituate themselves to this pattern of engagement, the space for a politics based on shared world-building, mutual promise-making, and responsible judgment shrinks. The loudest and most emotionally charged stories dominate, and quieter, more complex realities struggle to be heard.

Arendt's work invites a double response. On the one hand, it calls for institutional and technological reforms that protect the fragile space of factual truth and common sense. On the other hand, it insists on the importance of personal and communal practices that resist the drift toward mass man: genuine conversation, participation in local institutions, cultivation of solitude rather than loneliness. In the context of rage bait, this might mean not only altering platform incentives but also fostering ways of living that make it less attractive to outsource one's sense of reality and belonging to the next scandal in the feed.

7. Guy Debord: Spectacle, Commodity, and the Management of Affects

With Debord, the analysis of rage bait reaches the terrain of late capitalism and its image regimes. Where Kierkegaard focuses on the press, Nietzsche on ressentiment, Le Bon on crowd psychology, and Arendt on loneliness and propaganda, Debord asks what happens when the entire social field is reorganized around images and commodities. For him, the "society of the spectacle" is not just a world with a lot of pictures or entertainment; it is a form of social organization in which human relations are increasingly mediated by representations and consumed as appearances.

In such a society, the key distinction is not simply between truth and falsehood, but between lived experience and its image. The spectacle replaces direct, unmediated relations with a continuous flow of representations that present themselves as the only reality worth engaging. People become spectators of their own lives and of political, economic, and cultural processes that they no longer experience as their own doing. Within this framework, rage bait appears as a particularly profitable genre of spectacle: emotionally charged images and narratives that capture attention, organize affects, and keep spectators engaged in ways that are economically valuable but politically neutralizing.

7.1 The Society of the Spectacle and the rule of images

Debord's central claim is that in advanced capitalist societies, the image has come to dominate social life. This does not mean that individuals are simply deceived by false pictures. Rather, images become the primary medium through which social relations are experienced.

Advertising, news, entertainment, and political communication all contribute to a pervasive environment in which what matters is not so much what things are, but how they appear and can be displayed.

The spectacle, in this sense, is a total environment of mediated experience. It includes billboards and television shows, but also the way urban spaces are designed, the choreography of public events, and the circulation of photographs and slogans. The spectacle is the dominant language of social life—the set of codes through which recognition, aspiration, and conflict are articulated. It presents itself as a seamless, self-evident reality: images of happiness, success, danger, and rebellion are arranged so that they feel natural and inevitable.

In such a world, the rule of images has specific political consequences. The more life is organized around representations, the harder it becomes to act directly on the conditions those representations depict. Instead of confronting problems at their roots, people are encouraged to consume images of concern, protest, or solution. The spectacle offers vicarious participation: one feels involved by watching, liking, and repeating, even as the underlying structures remain unchanged.

Rage bait fits comfortably within this regime. It is not an aberration but a refinement. It provides images of conflict and transgression that can be rapidly consumed and circulated. Short clips, screenshots, and headlines are arranged into a never-ending stream of mini-spectacles. Each promises a condensed dose of emotional intensity: outrage at an injustice, disgust at a breach of norms, shock at a transgressive act. The rule of images ensures that these fragments, rather than longer, slower processes, dominate the field of attention.

From a Debordian perspective, the danger is not only that these images may distort reality, but that they become reality's substitute in the realm of public concern. What people "know" about their society increasingly consists of such spectacles of outrage, consumed in rapid succession. The structures that make those spectacles possible—economic arrangements, institutional designs, long-term historical trajectories—remain largely invisible. The spectacle thus both reveals and conceals: it shows dramatic episodes while hiding the conditions that generate them.

7.2 Separation, passivity, and the spectator as a political figure

A defining feature of the spectacle, for Debord, is separation. Individuals are separated from one another, from their own activity, and from the products of their labor. This separation is then masked by the apparent unity of media: everyone sees the same images, follows the same events, and participates in the same conversations. Yet this shared spectatorship does not overcome separation; it reorganizes it. People are connected as viewers, not as co-actors in a common world.

In this arrangement, passivity becomes a central political problem. The spectator's role is to watch, react, and move on. The spectacle invites commentary and opinion—indeed encourages them—but rarely allows for direct intervention. The feeling of engagement is decoupled from actual agency. One can be intensely invested in what happens on screens while having little or no grip on the processes that determine those events.

The spectator thus becomes a specific political figure. They are not apathetic; they care, sometimes deeply, about what they see. But their caring is channeled into forms that do not threaten the stability of the system. They express judgments, align with brands or causes, perform outrage or solidarity, all within a framework that treats these expressions as consumable content. Political life is displaced onto the plane of visible attitudes and impressions.

Rage bait exploits and reinforces this spectator condition. It energizes people within the precise limits of spectatorship. A rage-bait episode offers a clear script: see the offense, feel anger, declare a stance, perhaps participate in a collective denunciation. The individual's political and ethical energy is mobilized but kept within the bounds of watching and reacting. The key is that this pattern can repeat indefinitely. Each new outrage renews the sense of involvement without requiring any fundamental change in the spectator's position.

Debord's emphasis on separation helps clarify why this cycle can coexist with widespread feelings of political powerlessness. Spectators may be saturated with images of conflict and crisis, yet still experience their own lives as disconnected from the levers of change. The spectacle offers them a surrogate arena for agency—curated feeds, comment sections, and trending topics—while leaving the structures of production, governance, and ownership relatively untouched. Rage bait, as one of the spectacle's more intense offerings, tightens this loop between emotional stimulation and practical impotence.

7.3 Commodification of attention, desire, and dissent

In Debord's view, the spectacle is inseparable from commodity culture. Images do not circulate in a vacuum; they are tied to the production, marketing, and consumption of goods. The spectacle sells not only products but also ways of life, identities, and aspirations. Desire is shaped and redirected through representations of what it means to be successful, attractive, or free. Even dissent is not exempt; it too can be packaged and sold as a lifestyle.

In digital capitalism, this commodification operates through the capture and monetization of attention. Platforms and media outlets treat attention as a scarce resource to be accumulated and traded. Every click, view, and interaction becomes part of a data trail that can be analyzed and sold. Under these conditions, the spectacle's logic intensifies: images must not only communicate meanings but also hold eyes and generate measurable engagement.

Desire is likewise commodified. Users are shown carefully personalized feeds designed to align with their preferences and to stimulate further consumption. Political and cultural content is mixed with entertainment and advertising, blurring the lines between them. The spectacle subsumes even critique by offering commodified forms of opposition: branded activism, shareable slogans, and curated controversy.

Dissent, in this environment, is easily absorbed. Expressions of discontent can be turned into content streams, complete with monetization opportunities. A posture of resistance becomes another way of attracting followers and building a brand. The spectacle can thus appear to host a vibrant marketplace of opinions while keeping dissent safely within consumable forms.

Rage bait is particularly valuable in this economy. Outrage is a high-engagement emotion. Content that elicits strong anger, disgust, or fear tends to generate more comments, shares, and extended viewing. From a business perspective, outrage is a premium commodity: it yields more data, more advertising impressions, and more opportunities to shape user behavior. The emotional costs to individuals and societies do not appear on the balance sheet.

Debord's lens reveals that the problem is not just manipulative content creators or flawed algorithms. It is the deeper logic of a system that treats attention and affect as raw materials to be extracted and monetized. Rage bait is one of the most efficient extraction tools available. It transforms genuine moral and political sensitivities into profitable engagement, converting concern and anger into economic value without necessarily addressing the underlying issues that provoke them.

7.4 Outrage as a premium spectacle commodity in digital capitalism

Bringing these threads together, outrage can be seen as a premium commodity within the society of the spectacle. Not all emotions are equally profitable. Mild interest and quiet satisfaction may be pleasant, but they do not generate as much activity. Outrage, by contrast, compels action—even if that action is limited to clicking, replying, and sharing. It demands expression. It feels morally urgent. From the standpoint of a platform optimized for engagement, it is ideal.

Rage bait is the deliberate or emergent production of spectacles designed to harvest this commodity. It does not necessarily invent grievances; many of the issues it highlights are real and serious. But it frames them in ways that maximize affective intensity and minimize deliberation. It turns structural problems into personalized scandals, complicated dynamics into simple moral dramas, and long-term struggles into episodic flare-ups.

In doing so, rage bait completes a circuit that runs through all the thinkers considered in this paper. It mobilizes Kierkegaard's phantom public, offering it endless material for leveling commentary. It gratifies Nietzschean ressentiment, supplying new targets for the pleasure of

condemnation. It activates Le Bon's crowd dynamics, relying on contagion and imitation to spread. It deepens Arendt's concerns about a mass of uprooted individuals living in fractured realities by privileging emotionally coherent stories over factual nuance. And in Debord's terms, it functions as one of the spectacle's most lucrative genres, managing affects in ways that serve the commodification of attention.

Crucially, this does not mean that outrage is always illegitimate or that anger has no place in public life. There are circumstances in which anger at injustice is both appropriate and necessary. The issue, from a Debordian perspective, is that in the spectacle outrage is abstracted from effective action and repurposed as content. It circulates, intensifies, and dissipates without necessarily altering the conditions that gave rise to it. Spectators are kept busy feeling and expressing, less so building and transforming.

Understanding outrage as a premium spectacle commodity shifts the question from "Why are people so angry?" to "Who benefits from the circulation of anger in this form?" It suggests that any serious response to the rage-bait ecosystem will have to look beyond calls for civility or individual self-control. It will have to confront the economic and technical arrangements that make outrage so profitable, and consider what alternative infrastructures for public feeling and political engagement might look like.

Debord's analysis does not offer a simple program, but it does sharpen the stakes. As long as the spectacle remains the dominant mode of social organization, rage bait will be more than an unfortunate side effect; it will be one of its preferred tools. To imagine a public sphere less governed by permanent indignation is, in this light, inseparable from imagining forms of life in which images and commodities no longer manage our affects so comprehensively—and in which spectators have become participants again.

8. Comparative Synthesis: Five Angles on the Rage-Bait Regime

Taken separately, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord each illuminate a different dimension of the rage-bait ecosystem. Together, they provide a composite diagnosis of a public sphere that has drifted toward permanent, monetized indignation. What emerges is not a single theory that explains everything, but a set of overlapping lenses that reveal how ethical, psychological, political, and economic structures interact. Rage bait is not just a media trick or a matter of bad taste; it is a symptom of a deeper configuration in which anonymity, mediated perception, and structural vulnerability converge.

This synthesis section draws out convergences among the five thinkers, highlights their divergences, and maps their key concepts—crowd, herd, mass man, and spectacle—onto the rage-bait regime. It then considers what this composite view helps us understand about today's

platforms and their characteristic pathologies. The aim is not to force these thinkers into agreement, but to show how their distinct concerns interlock in ways that make contemporary outrage-driven media look less like an accident and more like a predictable outcome of modernity's unresolved tensions.

8.1 Convergences: anonymity, mediation, and exploited vulnerability

Despite their very different contexts and vocabularies, the five thinkers converge on several core points that are directly relevant to rage bait.

First, they all recognize the dangers of anonymity in large collectivities. For Kierkegaard, the crowd and the public permit individuals to act and speak without genuine responsibility. Le Bon sees anonymity in crowds as a key factor in lowering inhibitions and unleashing impulsive behavior. Arendt notes how mass society generates interchangeable individuals, easily subsumed into movements that treat them as material. Debord's spectators are anonymous viewers, counted and targeted as metrics rather than as persons. In each case, anonymity loosens the tie between the self and its actions, making it easier to express extreme emotions or judgments without confronting their consequences. Rage bait relies heavily on this: anonymous or semi-anonymous users are encouraged to join waves of denunciation, confident that their individual contribution will be swallowed by the whole.

Second, mediation is central. None of these thinkers imagine their publics as primarily face-to-face communities. Kierkegaard's press, Nietzsche's herd in the age of newspapers and pamphlets, Le Bon's crowds exposed to slogans and imagery, Arendt's citizens saturated with propaganda and mass media, Debord's society of the spectacle structured by images—all point to a world in which experience is increasingly shaped by intermediaries. Direct encounters with reality and with others are replaced by representations. Rage bait is one of the latest and most intense forms of such mediation: a stream of curated, edited, framed fragments that stand in for complex events and relationships.

Third, they all perceive a set of exploited vulnerabilities in modern individuals. Kierkegaard worries about the loss of inwardness and vocation in an age of reflection and leveling. Nietzsche dissects the resentful tendency to seek compensation in moralized blame. Le Bon emphasizes suggestibility and the ease with which crowds can be infected by emotions. Arendt is preoccupied with loneliness, uprootedness, and the erosion of common sense. Debord insists on separation, passivity, and the reduction of life to spectatorship. These vulnerabilities are not purely psychological; they are produced by structural changes in social organization, economy, and culture. Rage bait exploits them by offering easy outlets for resentment, ready-made emotional scripts for the isolated, and an illusion of participation for the passive spectator.

Fourth, there is an implicit agreement that modern mass arrangements can hollow out the conditions for serious judgment. Whether it is Kierkegaard's leveling of seriousness, Nietzsche's critique of herd morality, Le Bon's lowering of intellectual level in crowds, Arendt's corrosion of factual reality, or Debord's substitution of spectacle for lived experience, each thinker points to a degradation of the faculties needed for responsible engagement. Rage bait flourishes precisely where such degradation has advanced: in environments where people are quick to judge but slow to understand, eager to react but unable to act in ways that matter, overloaded with information but starved for shared reality.

These convergences suggest that rage bait should not be understood as a superficial problem of "bad content" or "incivility," fixable by better manners or fact-checking alone. It sits at the intersection of anonymity, mediation, and vulnerability that have been building for generations.

8.2 Divergences: ethical, psychological, political, and economic lenses

The five thinkers also diverge in important ways, highlighting different aspects of the rage-bait regime and cautioning against reductionist explanations.

Kierkegaard's lens is primarily ethical and spiritual. His concern is with the single individual's relation to truth, God, and selfhood. He sees the crowd and the press as temptations away from authentic existence. From his standpoint, rage bait is primarily a threat to inwardness and vocation: it draws the individual into a constant chatter of opinions and outrages that makes it harder to stand in serious, solitary relation to what truly matters. His proposed response is not primarily institutional reform but a reclamation of individual responsibility and silence.

Nietzsche's lens is psychological and genealogical. He is interested in how values emerge from underlying drives and power relations. He interprets moral outrage not as straightforwardly noble but as often rooted in ressentiment. From his standpoint, rage bait is an industrial apparatus for harvesting and redistributing ressentiment. He pushes us to ask not only whether anger is justified but what it does to those who indulge it. His implied remedy is a reorientation of the will toward creative self-overcoming rather than reactive condemnation, a difficult task in a media environment designed to reward the latter.

Le Bon's approach is socio-psychological and arguably more descriptive than normative. He charts the behavior of crowds without offering a comprehensive ethical or political alternative. From his standpoint, rage bait is simply a powerful stimulus for crowd formation and emotional contagion in digital spaces. His analysis warns of the fragility of rational deliberation under crowd conditions, but does not provide a robust account of how to build institutions that resist such dynamics.

Arendt's lens is political and historical. She is preoccupied with how totalitarianism emerges and what conditions make politics worthy of the name. She would see rage bait as part of a broader

transformation of citizens into mass men, living in fractured realities and vulnerable to manipulative narratives. For her, the response would have to involve rebuilding institutions and practices that sustain a shared world: public spaces where facts are respected, opinions can clash without imploding reality, and individuals can appear to one another as equal and distinct.

Debord's lens is critical-theoretical and economic. He interprets the spectacle as the form taken by capitalism at a certain stage of development. Rage bait, for him, would be a species of spectacle particularly effective at capturing attention and managing affects. His critique suggests that as long as attention and emotion are commodified, any attempt to reform content will be limited. Structural changes in the organization of media and ownership may be necessary to break the cycle.

These divergences are fruitful. They prevent us from collapsing the problem of rage bait into a single domain—whether it be morality, psychology, politics, or economics. Instead, they encourage a layered understanding. Efforts to address rage bait at only one level—for example, by tweaking algorithms without considering users' loneliness, or by urging personal restraint without altering incentive structures—are likely to be partial and fragile.

8.3 Mapping rage bait onto crowd, herd, mass, and spectacle concepts

Each thinker offers a signature concept that can be used to map specific aspects of rage bait: the crowd (Kierkegaard and Le Bon), the herd (Nietzsche), mass man (Arendt), and the spectacle (Debord).

The crowd, in Kierkegaard's and Le Bon's sense, helps capture the immediate social form of rage-bait episodes. When a scandal breaks, users assemble—at least virtually—into formations that exhibit crowd-like properties: emotional intensity, rapid contagion, diminished individuality, and a sense of shared purpose. Comment sections, quote-tweet storms, and viral hashtags function as digital squares in which crowds gather, shout, and disperse. The crowd concept highlights the dynamics of anonymity, imitation, and impulsivity that characterize these moments.

The herd, in Nietzsche's sense, points to the underlying moral economy. Rage-bait episodes are not just crowds shouting; they are crowds judging. The content is framed in terms of good and evil, innocence and guilt, victim and perpetrator. Individuals signal their belonging to the herd by reacting with the approved moral emotions. The herd concept emphasizes the role of shared values, ressentiment, and the pleasure of condemnation. It alerts us to the risk that outrage, even when aimed at real wrongs, can become less about justice and more about affirming group identity.

Mass man, in Arendt's usage, describes the subject position that makes both crowd and herd behavior likely: an individual who is lonely, uprooted, and indifferent to factual nuance. Rage

bait appeals to mass man's need for clarity and belonging. It offers simple, emotionally coherent narratives in place of a confusing reality, and a sense of being on the right side against indistinct enemies. The mass concept highlights the conditions of atomization and disorientation that make people receptive to rage-bait content.

The spectacle, in Debord's analysis, provides the overarching form within which crowd, herd, and mass operate today. Rage bait is one of the spectacle's genres: a set of images and stories designed for consumption by spectators whose attention is commodified. The spectacle concept draws attention to the economic and infrastructural aspects: the way platforms are built, measured, and monetized, and how those arrangements shape what kinds of outrage are most visible and profitable.

Mapping rage bait across these concepts yields a more complete picture. It is not only that individuals form crowds, or that they exhibit herd morality, or that they are masses living in fractured realities, or that they are spectators in a spectacle. It is all of these at once. Crowd dynamics amplify herd moral judgments among mass men inside a spectacle economy. Any serious account of rage bait must do justice to this multi-layered structure.

8.4 What this composite view explains about today's platforms

When applied to contemporary platforms, this composite perspective clarifies several otherwise puzzling features of the rage-bait regime.

First, it explains why rage bait feels both exhausting and compulsive. From Kierkegaard's point of view, users are trapped in a cycle of leveling commentary that erodes seriousness, yet they are drawn to it because it offers a constant stream of topics for judgment. Nietzsche helps explain why people keep returning: outrage gratifies ressentiment, offers the pleasure of condemnation, and provides a sense of moral significance. Le Bon shows how each new episode is capable of rapidly reconstituting a crowd, activating emotional contagion and imitation. Arendt adds that for many, these episodes provide rare moments of felt belonging and clarity in a world that otherwise appears disorienting. Debord concludes that platforms are structurally incentivized to keep this cycle going, because it generates the engagement on which their business models depend.

Second, this view explains why attempts to "depolarize" or "de-escalate" online discourse often struggle. If rage bait were simply a matter of bad actors posting inflammatory content, removal or moderation might suffice. But the five thinkers highlight deeper issues: moral economies built on ressentiment, psychological tendencies toward crowd behavior, widespread loneliness and loss of shared reality, and commodified attention. Platforms operate at the junction of these forces. Even well-intentioned design changes can be neutralized by economic pressures, user expectations, and broader social conditions.

Third, the composite lens helps distinguish between necessary anger and manufactured outrage. The thinkers do not deny that some situations warrant strong emotion. What worries them is the transformation of anger into a routine, semi-automatic response detached from effective action. Platforms tend to favor the latter because it is more sustainable as content. The framework offered here suggests evaluative questions: Does a given rage-bait episode connect outrage to meaningful avenues for change, or does it merely cycle spectators through feelings? Does it deepen understanding or simplify it into easily consumable moral drama? Does it strengthen or weaken the shared world of facts?

Fourth, this synthesis illuminates why purely individual solutions—logging off, cultivating personal calm, practicing media literacy—while valuable, are insufficient. The problems identified are structural: they concern the shape of public life, the design of platforms, and the conditions in which people live and work. Kierkegaard's call to individual inwardness, Nietzsche's appeal to self-overcoming, Arendt's emphasis on political institutions, and Debord's critique of capitalist media structures all point to the need for changes at multiple levels. Personal discipline without institutional reform risks becoming another form of privatized coping, while institutional reforms without attention to psychology and ethics risk being undermined from within.

Finally, the composite view suggests that any constructive response to rage bait must aim not just at suppressing certain kinds of content, but at building alternative modes of public engagement. That might involve creating spaces that reward slow, dialogical, and action-linked forms of communication; supporting institutions that can uphold factual truth without succumbing to propaganda; fostering communities that mitigate loneliness and provide non-virtual forms of belonging; and rethinking economic models that treat attention as a resource to be mined. The five thinkers do not offer a blueprint for such changes, but they do provide criteria by which to judge their plausibility: do they reduce anonymity's temptations, counteract ressentiment, resist crowd impulsivity, repair the shared world, and loosen the grip of the spectacle?

Seen through their combined eyes, rage bait appears less as an inexplicable pathology and more as a symptom of a regime. It is what happens when publics are phantom crowds, moral life is dominated by ressentiment, mass men seek orientation in fractured realities, and images mediate and commodify nearly all experience. To anticipate rage bait, in the sense invoked by the title of this paper, is to recognize that long before the phrase was coined, its basic dynamics were already legible to thinkers attentive to the darker possibilities of modernity.

9. Contemporary Extensions: Algorithms, Platforms, and Design

The earlier sections have treated rage bait primarily as a cultural and structural phenomenon: a product of mass society, crowd dynamics, ressentiment, loneliness, and spectacle. In the contemporary environment, those forces are channeled through specific technical and economic infrastructures: algorithms that rank and recommend content, platforms that monetize engagement, and design choices that govern how users encounter and respond to information. These infrastructures do not create the human tendencies described by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord, but they crystallize and amplify them in distinctive ways.

This section turns to those contemporary extensions. It examines how engagement metrics institutionalize outrage as a desirable outcome, how personalization and virality shape the circulation of rage bait, how platform governance struggles with the illusion of neutrality, and what it might mean to design against rage bait in practice. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive technical blueprint, but to show how the earlier theoretical insights can inform a critical understanding of platform architecture and its constraints.

9.1 Engagement metrics as institutionalized incentives for outrage

At the heart of most major platforms lies a set of metrics: clicks, likes, shares, comments, watch time, retention, and related signals. These metrics serve multiple roles. They provide feedback to content creators, shape algorithmic ranking and recommendation, and ultimately determine advertising revenue and investor confidence. In principle, they are neutral measures of user interest. In practice, they function as institutionalized incentives that favor content capable of eliciting strong, repeatable reactions.

Outrage is particularly well suited to this regime. It tends to increase time spent on the platform, as users read comments, follow threads, and check for responses. It generates comments and quote posts, which the system interprets as signs of engagement. It encourages sharing, both to mobilize allies and to display moral stance. From an abstract perspective, the metric system is indifferent to whether engagements are positive or negative, informed or impulsive. A measured interaction is simply a success.

Over time, this indifference becomes a preference, because the system is tuned to maximize aggregate engagement. Experimental adjustments to ranking algorithms are evaluated by their impact on these metrics. If content that provokes outrage consistently leads to higher engagement than content that informs without inflaming, the system will, all else equal, tilt toward outrage. No explicit decision to promote rage bait is necessary; it emerges as the path of least resistance in a landscape defined by the numerical performance of content.

For creators, engagement metrics function as a form of behavioral conditioning. They quickly learn what styles, topics, and framings generate numbers. Subtle incentives accumulate: slightly more provocative titles, more emotionally charged language, more focus on conflict and scandal. Many creators might not think of themselves as producing rage bait; they are simply responding to what "works." The institutional logic, however, is clear. Engagement becomes the currency of success, and outrage is a high-yield asset.

From the standpoint of the five thinkers, this metric regime embeds their concerns in code. Kierkegaard's worry that the press stirs up the public for amusement becomes measurable click-through rates. Nietzsche's suspicion that ressentiment finds endless nourishment becomes a statistical pattern of high comment volume on morally charged posts. Le Bon's contagion appears in graphs of virality and cascades. Arendt's corrosion of shared reality is reflected in the success of emotionally satisfying but factually dubious stories. Debord's spectacle becomes a dashboard of impressions, a financial statement of affect management.

9.2 The role of personalization, recommendation, and virality

While engagement metrics provide the incentives, personalization and recommendation systems decide who sees what and when. These systems use data about past behavior—what users clicked, watched, liked, and skipped—to predict what they are likely to engage with next. On this basis, they rank and filter vast pools of content, constructing individualized feeds. Virality, in turn, describes how certain pieces of content escape their initial niches and spread rapidly across networks.

Personalization intensifies the rage-bait dynamic in several ways. First, it allows the system to identify users who are particularly responsive to outrage cues and to supply them with more of the same. Someone who frequently engages with stories framed as moral scandals, threats, or betrayals is treated as a "good candidate" for similar content. Their feed gradually fills with episodes that confirm their emotional and ideological patterns. The result is not just an echo chamber of opinions, but an echo chamber of outrage styles.

Second, personalization fragments the public into micro-publics clustered around specific animosities. Where older mass media might have broadcast a limited number of scandals to a broad audience, personalized feeds can support thousands of overlapping outrage cycles, each tailored to a particular group's sensitivities. Rage bait no longer needs to be universally inflammatory; it only needs to resonate strongly within a niche to be promoted within that niche. The impression of a society perpetually on the brink of breakdown is amplified, as each group sees evidence of its own nightmares realized.

Recommendation systems also shape virality. Content that triggers intense engagement within one cluster can be tested with adjacent clusters. If it continues to perform, it moves outward.

Rage bait, by design or accident, often travels well because it compresses complex conflicts into simple moral dramas that can be reinterpreted to fit different narratives. A single video of a confrontation can be framed as proof of many different grievances, each version reinforcing the outrage scripts of its own audience.

From a theoretical perspective, personalization and virality weave together Le Bon's crowd, Nietzsche's herd, and Arendt's mass man into new patterns. Crowds form and dissolve at algorithmic speed around particular pieces of content. Herd morality is sharpened as groups are constantly supplied with material that fits their moral universe. Mass individuals, already searching for clarity and belonging, find themselves addressed by feeds that promise both, at the cost of further isolating them from alternative views and shared realities.

Debord's spectacle is also refined. The spectacle no longer appears only as a single, mass broadcast; it becomes a patchwork of micro-spectacles, each tuned to a subset of viewers. Yet the underlying structure remains: spectators relate to one another primarily through images and reactions, mediated by a system whose organizing principle is engagement. Rage bait is the spectacle's traveling salesman, knocking on each personalized door with a customized pitch: look at this, you will not believe what they have done now.

9.3 Platform governance, responsibility, and the problem of the "view from nowhere"

Platform executives and designers often present themselves as neutral facilitators: they provide tools and infrastructure, not content or ideology. This stance resembles what might be called a "view from nowhere," a claim to simply reflect users' choices and preferences back to them in efficient ways. Governance, from this perspective, focuses on obvious harms: illegal content, targeted harassment, direct incitement to violence. Rage bait, which operates within legal and policy boundaries most of the time, appears harder to address.

The five thinkers, taken together, challenge the plausibility of this neutrality. For Kierkegaard, whoever shapes the public's attention and discourse has profound ethical responsibility, whether or not they produce original content. Nietzsche would note that any system that reliably rewards certain moral emotions over others is already a moral educator, whether it admits it or not. Le Bon would caution that those who can summon and direct crowds, even indirectly, cannot claim to be merely passive intermediaries. Arendt would insist that institutions that mediate reality for millions cannot evade responsibility for the health of the shared world. Debord would argue that the very act of organizing experience into images and metrics is politically charged.

In practice, platform governance operates within multiple constraints: legal regulations, shareholder expectations, public relations pressures, and internal cultures. Efforts to reduce harmful content or to promote "healthy conversations" often run up against the underlying

business model. Measures that significantly reduce outrage-driven engagement can be perceived as financial risks. Conversely, moves that appear to favor or disfavor particular groups or viewpoints can provoke accusations of bias, censorship, or complicity.

The problem of the "view from nowhere" becomes acute here. Platforms may aim to appear impartial, but their design decisions—what metrics to optimize, how to rank content, how to handle reports and appeals—embody value judgments. For example, choosing to optimize for "meaningful social interactions" instead of raw time-on-site is still a choice about what kind of engagement matters. Deciding whether to downrank content frequently labeled as misleading, even when popular, is a choice about the weight of factual accuracy versus user preference.

Rage bait exposes the limits of claimed neutrality. When the system repeatedly elevates content that keeps users in a state of agitated indignation, it is participating in the moral and political shaping of public life. Even if no one in the company consciously decides to promote outrage, the combination of metrics, algorithms, and moderation policies acts as a de facto decision. Governance, in this context, cannot be reduced to the narrow management of explicit rule violations; it must also confront the systemic effects of seemingly neutral optimization.

9.4 Designing against rage bait: constraints, trade-offs, and unintended consequences

If rage bait is partly a product of design, incentives, and infrastructure, it is natural to ask whether platforms could be redesigned to resist it. Proposals range from technical tweaks (different ranking signals, limits on sharing, friction for forwarding content) to structural reforms (alternative business models, public or cooperative ownership, regulatory intervention). The five thinkers do not provide direct guidance on user interface choices or algorithm design, but their insights can help clarify what is at stake in these efforts.

One set of interventions focuses on dampening virality and impulsivity. For example, adding friction—extra clicks, waiting periods, or prompts asking whether a user has read an article before sharing—aims to slow down the crowd's reflexes. From a Le Bon perspective, such measures attempt to counteract contagion and imitation. They may help reintroduce moments of reflection into the outrage cycle, reducing the speed and scale of pile-ons.

Another cluster of ideas targets metrics. Platforms could de-emphasize raw engagement numbers in ranking and in creator dashboards, or complement them with alternative signals such as diversity of sources, depth of reading, or user-reported quality measures. This would not remove economic pressures, but it could rebalance incentives away from pure emotional intensity. Nietzsche's critique of ressentiment suggests that systems which reward only moralized anger are likely to produce stunted forms of agency; diversified metrics might at least widen the repertoire of rewarded behaviors.

Personalization algorithms could also be redesigned to expose users to a wider range of content, or to prioritize material that bridges divides rather than intensifying them. Arendt's concern for a shared world would support designs that protect pockets of common reality. However, such efforts face trade-offs: users often prefer feeds that confirm their views, and forcing exposure to disagreeable content can backfire, deepening mistrust of the platform.

At a deeper level, Debord's analysis warns that as long as attention is commodified and images are the primary medium of social relation, many attempts to design against rage bait will be partial. Platforms that depend on advertising revenue are structurally incentivized to keep users engaged, and outrage remains a reliable engagement driver. More radical proposals—subscription models, public funding, cooperative ownership—aim to decouple platform survival from maximum engagement. These, too, come with constraints: willingness to pay, political feasibility, and the risk of new forms of capture or control.

Unintended consequences are a constant risk. Measures intended to reduce rage bait might entrench existing power structures if they disproportionately suppress oppositional voices. Efforts to promote civility might silence justified anger from marginalized groups. Attempts to algorithmically identify and downrank "outrageous" content can be gamed or biased. From Kierkegaard's perspective, any external attempt to purify public discourse cannot substitute for the inner task of becoming an individual who resists the seductions of the crowd. From Nietzsche's, there is danger in systems that seek to domesticate all strong feeling, potentially flattening life into lukewarm conformity.

Designing against rage bait, then, is best understood as a multi-level endeavor. It involves technical adjustments to metrics and algorithms, institutional reforms of ownership and regulation, and cultural shifts in how people think about their participation in public life. It also requires a degree of honesty about trade-offs. Reducing outrage-driven engagement may mean slower growth, lower profits, or reduced time-on-site. Creating room for depth and nuance may mean fewer instant hits and more content that does not lend itself to quick reactions.

The theoretical framework developed in this paper suggests one further criterion: any successful design effort must address not only the supply of rage-bait content, but also the demand for it. As long as individuals remain lonely, resentful, uprooted, and habituated to spectatorship, there will be a strong appetite for content that offers moral clarity and emotional intensity at low cost. Platforms can either exploit or resist this appetite; they cannot wish it away. The five thinkers remind us that the work of resistance is as much existential and political as it is technical: it concerns how people live together, what they take to be reality, and how they understand their own agency.

In that sense, the project of designing against rage bait is inseparable from a larger project of reimagining the public sphere. It is not only a matter of tweaking interfaces or regulating data flows, but of cultivating forms of life in which being informed does not mean being permanently provoked, and in which the deepest human energies are not captured by an endless stream of outrage, but directed toward building something more durable than the next scandal in the feed.

10. Ethical and Political Implications

The rage-bait regime is not just a curiosity of media studies; it is a moral and political problem. If a large share of public attention is captured by content that maximizes outrage rather than understanding, then the conditions for responsible citizenship, institutional trust, and meaningful disagreement are degraded. Yet the system is not simply imposed from above. It emerges from the interactions of users, designers, advertisers, investors, and institutions, none of whom fully control it.

This produces an uncomfortable situation. Almost everyone can sincerely claim to be "just doing their job" or "just expressing their feelings," while the aggregate outcome is corrosive. The central ethical and political question becomes: in a system that distributes agency and blame so widely, what can responsibility still mean? The answer cannot be to place the entire burden on individuals, nor to absolve human actors on the grounds that "the algorithm" did it. It has to be articulated across roles and levels, from solitary users to engineers, editors, executives, and legislators, and also in the spaces that stand partially outside the rage-bait economy.

10.1 Responsibility in a system that distributes agency and blame

Rage bait is a systemic phenomenon, and systemic phenomena tempt us to treat "the system" as the only real agent. The user is "just scrolling." The creator is "just making what the audience wants." The platform is "just reflecting engagement." Advertisers are "just following the numbers." Politicians are "just using the tools available." At each node, responsibility is deflected upward, downward, or sideways. The system appears as an impersonal force without a face.

Ethically, however, the system is nothing more than the stabilized pattern of many individual and institutional actions. Algorithms are written, metrics are chosen, content is framed, and policies are enforced by people, even if their effects in combination exceed anyone's intentions. This does not mean that blame can be cleanly assigned, but it does mean that responsibility cannot simply disappear into abstractions. The fact that no one actor controls the whole is precisely why each actor must consider not only immediate incentives but also predictable contributions to the overall pattern.

Responsibility under such conditions is partly about thresholds of power. A single user with a small following bears a different kind of responsibility than a head of product at a major platform. Yet there is also a common element: the duty to resist the most obvious temptations of the structure one inhabits. For an ordinary user, this might mean refusing to join certain pile-ons, interrogating the pleasures of condemnation, or being cautious about impulsive shares. For a creator, it might mean declining to escalate rhetoric in ways that knowingly inflame. For a designer, it might mean advocating internally against metric choices that reward permanent agitation.

There is also the question of complicity. Once the structural harms of rage bait are widely recognized, continued participation without reflection acquires a moral dimension. The situation resembles other large-scale harms (environmental damage, exploitative labor systems) where individuals both suffer from and sustain the system. No one is innocent in a pure sense, but degrees and kinds of complicity matter. Honest acknowledgment of partial implication is preferable to both self-righteous distance and cynical resignation.

Finally, responsibility has to include the courage to name structural features as such. It is ethically easier to condemn individual "bad actors" than to criticize the design of platforms, the logic of engagement metrics, or the expectations of investors. Yet as long as the critique stops at the level of personal incivility, the larger machinery remains untouched. An ethics adequate to the rage-bait regime has to operate on multiple scales: not only "How should I behave here?" but also "What kinds of infrastructures am I willing to help build, fund, or legitimize?"

10.2 Citizens, designers, and institutions under rage-bait conditions

Under rage-bait conditions, roles that once seemed distinct begin to blur. Citizens are also content producers. Designers and engineers are also citizens and consumers. Institutions that used to operate at some distance from mass emotion—courts, universities, professional associations, religions—are drawn into the dynamics of platforms where reputation and legitimacy are continually renegotiated in public.

For citizens, the primary ethical challenge is to inhabit a public world that is at once over-saturated with stimuli and under-supplied with stable points of reference. It is unrealistic to expect anyone to be constantly vigilant, perfectly informed, or immune to emotional triggers. Yet citizenship does presuppose some minimal habits: a reluctance to treat every scandal as final proof, a willingness to check sources before amplifying, a capacity to sit with ambiguity instead of demanding instant moral clarity. These habits are not glamorous. They do not produce viral posts. But they are small acts of resistance against a system that would prefer us permanently reactive.

Designers, engineers, and product managers inhabit a different tension. Their professional success is measured in engagement graphs, signups, and revenue, yet they are increasingly aware that certain forms of "success" corrode the public sphere in which they themselves live. Their responsibilities include not only obeying the law and avoiding egregious harms, but also pushing back—within their organizations—against designs that predictably amplify rage bait, even if those designs "perform" in narrow terms. This can mean advocating for alternative metrics, building in friction, or documenting unintended effects. It is not a simple matter of individual heroism; it is a struggle over what counts as good work.

Institutions—newsrooms, schools, libraries, local governments, churches, civic associations—face their own dilemmas. To reach people, they feel pressure to adopt the formats and tones that the platforms reward. This can lead to a slow convergence toward the rage-bait style: more emphasis on conflict, sharper headlines, stronger language. Yet their legitimacy often depends on being recognizably different from the surrounding noise. Their ethical task is to maintain that difference without withdrawing entirely from the spaces where people now spend so much of their time.

Politically, this raises the question of mediation. Institutions can act as buffers between citizens and the raw forces of the platform economy. A school that teaches media literacy in a non-cynical way, a newsroom that refuses to frame every story as an outrage, a local civic group that organizes in-person deliberation: these are forms of institutional responsibility that do not eliminate rage bait but offer alternative rhythms and standards. In a world where the default public interface is engineered for speed and emotion, institutions that insist on slowness, proportion, and factuality are not quaint; they are countervailing powers.

10.3 Possibilities for counterpublics, slow media, and alternative infrastructures

If rage bait has become the default tone of major platforms, one response is not to reform those spaces directly, but to cultivate counterpublics—communities that develop their own norms, media practices, and infrastructures at some distance from the mainstream attention economy. These can take many forms: small forums, newsletters, federated social networks, community radios or podcasts, local print publications, and hybrid online/offline groups.

Counterpublics are not automatically virtuous; niche spaces can be more extreme, closed, or conspiratorial than mass platforms. But the concept points to the possibility of publics whose central organizing principle is not maximum engagement. A counterpublic oriented around serious conversation might deliberately eschew certain affordances: no public metrics of popularity, longer posting formats, slower rhythms of discussion, stronger moderation for tone rather than viewpoint. The price of admission is patience; the reward is a different kind of attention.

Slow media is one concrete expression of this ethos. Instead of competing in the real-time race of feeds, slow media outlets publish less frequently but with more context, synthesis, and reflection. Their value proposition to readers is precisely that they do not chase every outrage cycle. Subscriptions, donations, or institutional support replace click-driven advertising as the primary funding model. In such settings, anger is not excluded, but it is given more space to be thought rather than merely triggered.

Alternative infrastructures go a step further, questioning the centralization and ownership structures of the dominant platforms. Federated networks, cooperatively owned platforms, and publicly funded digital commons experiment with different governance arrangements. They cannot escape all the dynamics of crowd behavior and ressentiment, but they can make different trade-offs around metrics, moderation, and design. Even small-scale successes are worth attending to, if only as proofs of concept that "inevitable" design choices are, in fact, contingent.

The existence of counterpublics and slow media does not solve the problem of rage bait on mass platforms. Most people will still spend significant time in the big, commercial spaces. But these alternatives can perform several important functions: they provide refuges for those seeking different modes of engagement; they model practices that can occasionally seep back into mainstream design; and they keep alive the sense that another kind of public sphere is possible, preventing despair from hardening into fatalism.

10.4 Limits of individual self-discipline in structurally provoked environments

Much commentary about online outrage eventually arrives at advice about individual self-discipline: log off more often, curate your feed, resist the urge to share, develop thicker skin, practice mindfulness. These recommendations are not wrong; at the level of personal well-being, they can be essential. But they risk mis-framing the problem if they become the main answer. Asking individuals to rely on willpower alone in environments engineered to provoke them is a bit like asking people to maintain perfect dietary discipline in a landscape where every corner hosts a fast-food restaurant designed by behavioral scientists.

There are at least three limits to self-discipline as a primary strategy. First, it is unevenly distributed. People differ in their time, resources, and psychological reserves. Those dealing with economic precarity, discrimination, or chronic stress may have less surplus capacity to manage their media environments carefully. An ethic that treats self-control as the main line of defense against rage bait risks blaming the most vulnerable for succumbing to pressures they did not design.

Second, self-discipline is fragile under cumulative strain. Even those who are generally reflective and cautious have bad days, late nights, and moments of exhaustion. The rage-bait regime does

not need to capture attention all the time; periodic lapses are enough to keep it profitable and politically consequential. Designing systems that rely on constant user vigilance is therefore ethically suspect. Good systems, where possible, should support users' better impulses rather than continually test them.

Third, an overemphasis on individual discipline obscures the need for structural change. It shifts the conversation from "Why are platforms built this way?" to "Why can't you control yourself?" This is analogous to environmental debates that focus exclusively on individual consumption choices while leaving untouched the infrastructures that make certain forms of consumption default. Without dismissing the importance of personal responsibility, it is necessary to insist that some problems cannot be solved at the level of personal habit alone.

The earlier thinkers implicitly support this dual perspective. Kierkegaard insists on the importance of the single individual's inwardness, but he is under no illusion that the press and the public are neutral backdrops. Nietzsche calls for self-overcoming, yet recognizes the weight of cultural formations that channel drives into ressentiment. Arendt emphasizes personal judgment and courage, but also the vital role of institutions in maintaining a factual world. Debord is clear that no individual asceticism can, by itself, undo the spectacle.

An adequate ethic for the rage-bait age therefore has to be two-sided. On one side, it encourages individuals to practice media restraint and moral humility: to notice what kinds of content they are drawn to, to interrogate their own pleasures in outrage, to cultivate relationships and activities that are not mediated by platforms. On the other side, it refuses to let this become an alibi for leaving the architectures of provocation unchanged. It calls for collective interventions—technical, legal, economic, cultural—that make it easier for self-discipline to succeed and less necessary for it to work at full intensity every time.

In sum, the ethical and political implications of rage bait cannot be reduced to personal exhortations or technocratic fixes. They touch the deepest questions of how agency, blame, and care are distributed in a society where public feeling is increasingly managed by systems that few understand and even fewer control. Any serious response will have to weave together micro-level practices of attention, meso-level reforms of institutions and professions, and macro-level transformations in how we build and fund the infrastructures through which we now see one another—and decide, again and again, whether to be enraged.

11. Conclusion: Naming the Mechanism, Resisting the Attractor

Rage bait is not a passing quirk of online culture. It is better understood as an attractor: a configuration toward which our media, our institutions, and our own unguarded impulses are repeatedly pulled. The phrase gives a name to what many already feel—being perpetually

nudged toward anger as the default mode of attention. The task of this paper has been to show that this attractor was legible long before timelines, recommendation engines, and viral clips: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord each traced one of its dimensions.

Bringing their analyses together reveals rage bait as a composite mechanism: a way of organizing perception and feeling under conditions of mass society, technological mediation, and commercialized attention. To name that mechanism is not to stand outside it. It is to gain a measure of lucidity about the forces in which we are already entangled. The remaining question is whether that lucidity can support any meaningful resistance—ethical, political, institutional—to the slide into permanent indignation as our shared way of being in public.

11.1 What the five thinkers help us see about rage bait

Each of the five thinkers isolates one aspect of a pattern that, in the digital present, comes into sharp relief.

Kierkegaard helps us see that rage bait presupposes a "public" that is both abstract and omnipresent: a phantom collective that comments on everything while being responsible for nothing. In such a setting, outrage becomes a kind of entertainment and self-distraction, folded into the leveling process that erases distinctions of seriousness and vocation. Rage bait belongs to an order of existence in which the individual is tempted to dissolve into opinionated noise rather than stand in solitary relation to what they truly care about.

Nietzsche exposes the inner economy that makes this tempting. Rage bait is a device for continually renewing ressentiment: the reactive satisfaction taken in finding yet another example of the wicked, the foolish, or the corrupt to condemn. It industrializes the pleasure of moral superiority while keeping its consumers at a safe distance from action. Through his lens, rage bait is not just an information pattern but a spiritual training regimen, cultivating habits of judgment that are more about exalting the self as righteous victim than about transforming the world.

Le Bon provides the grammar of crowd behavior that rage bait exploits. He describes how anonymity, contagion, and the power of vivid images fuse individuals into something more volatile and less reflective than they are alone. Rage bait functions as an efficient crowd-summoning signal. It assembles dispersed users into momentary mobs around clips, screenshots, and slogans, inviting them to feel and act as one—if only through synchronized gestures of outrage.

Arendt shifts the focus to the preconditions that make people available to such manipulation: loneliness, uprootedness, and the fraying of a shared world of facts. Rage bait thrives in a landscape where many no longer trust institutions, where reality feels fragmented and arbitrary, and where simple stories of friends and enemies offer relief. It contributes to the corrosion of

factual truth by rewarding narratives that fit pre-existing fears and suspicions, regardless of their empirical solidity.

Debord then situates rage bait in the political economy of images. In the society of the spectacle, attention is the prize and representation is the medium. Rage bait emerges as a particularly lucrative genre of spectacle: a commodity that reliably captures, organizes, and monetizes affects. It completes the circuit from structural vulnerability to commercial logic: what began as a set of dangers detected in mass society becomes, in digital capitalism, a profitable business model.

Taken together, these thinkers show that rage bait is not a glitch but a convergence. It is what happens when a phantom public, ressentiment, crowd psychology, mass loneliness, and spectacle are wired into algorithms that optimize for engagement. It is a regime, not an accident.

11.2 The risks of normalizing permanent indignation as public life

If rage bait has become a default mode of attention, what is at stake in accepting it as normal?

There is, first, a moral risk. When indignation becomes a habitual posture rather than an occasional response to genuine wrong, it loses discriminating power. Not everything is equally scandalous, and not every offense deserves the same reaction. A culture that treats every misstep, misstatement, or conflict as outrage-worthy makes it harder to distinguish between what is truly grave and what is merely irritating or symbolic. The scale for measuring moral seriousness becomes saturated at its upper end. Over time, this can breed both burnout and cynicism: burnout for those who feel compelled to care intensely about every new episode, cynicism for those who conclude that nothing matters because everything is presented as an emergency.

Second, there is a cognitive risk. Rage bait depends on compression: complex situations are reduced to short clips, decontextualized images, or single lines of text. This encourages a style of thinking that favors instant classification over inquiry. People learn to recognize patterns that trigger stock reactions—"yet another example of them doing that"—rather than to ask what is actually happening here and how it fits into a larger story. The capacity for sustained attention, nuance, and revision of judgment is eroded by constant training in snap evaluation.

Third, there is a relational risk. Permanent indignation corrodes trust, not only in institutions but in other people. When every group is presented primarily through the worst behavior of its loudest or most extreme members, the space for ordinary encounter shrinks. Strangers appear as potential enemies, carriers of the next offense. Within groups, there can be pressure to keep up with the latest outrage to prove loyalty. Relationships that might have been grounded in shared projects or local realities are instead mediated through distant scandals.

Fourth, there is a political risk. Rage bait substitutes expressive politics—displaying the right emotions, directing anger at acceptable targets—for effective politics, which requires organization, compromise, long-term strategy, and the capacity to prioritize. It can give people the feeling of being politically active while absorbing energy that might otherwise flow into more demanding forms of participation. It also makes coalition-building harder: a public trained to respond primarily to moral shock campaigns is less able to negotiate enduring disagreements and partial alignments.

The most insidious risk is that of naturalization. If rage-bait dynamics are treated as inevitable, simply "how the internet is," then critique loses its bite. People adjust expectations downward: of what discourse can be, of how institutions can function, of what they can be for one another. A diminished public life comes to feel like the only imaginable one. At that point, the rage-bait regime has not only captured attention; it has colonized the horizon of possibility.

11.3 Minimal requirements for a non-rage-baited public sphere

The point is not to imagine a public sphere without anger. A politics that never makes anyone angry would likely be a politics that ignores real injustice. The question, rather, is what minimal conditions would need to be in place for a public life that is not organized primarily around rage bait—one in which anger appears as a sometimes-necessary signal, not as the universal solvent.

At the institutional level, a non-rage-baited public sphere requires spaces that can maintain their own tempo and standards, partially insulated from the velocity of platform dynamics. This includes news organizations committed to verification, proportionality, and follow-up, not only to breaking scandal; courts and legal processes that can resist trial-by-timeline; schools and universities that teach not only critical distance but also patience and charitable reading; local civic bodies that operate on timescales longer than the outrage cycle. Such institutions cannot withdraw entirely from the digital public, but they can refuse to let it dictate their cadence.

At the infrastructural level, it requires communication systems that do not structurally privilege outrage over other forms of engagement. This could mean platforms or channels that de-emphasize visible popularity metrics, build in friction for rapid amplification, or use ranking criteria that give more weight to informativeness and reliability than to raw emotional response. It could also mean pluralizing infrastructures: not relying on a few gigantic, engagement-maximizing platforms as the primary arteries of public life.

At the cultural level, it demands the cultivation of virtues that run counter to rage bait's incentives: intellectual humility, a sense of proportion, willingness to say "I do not know enough to judge yet," openness to revising views, and a capacity to tolerate the tension of unresolved disagreement. These are not purely individual traits; they are shaped by the stories a society tells about what it means to be a good participant in public life. If prominence accrues primarily

to those who are quickest to denounce, the virtues of slowness and restraint will wither. If, instead, there is some recognition and reward for those who add clarity, context, or bridge-building, another pattern becomes at least thinkable.

At the existential level, a non-rage-baited public sphere presupposes people who find meaning and belonging in more than their next outrage. The loneliness and uprootedness Arendt described cannot be fully solved by media reform. They require thicker forms of common life: families, neighborhoods, associations, congregations, workplaces, and friendships in which one is known as more than an avatar of opinions. Without such supports, rage bait will continue to offer what it does best: quick pulses of significance in the void.

These requirements are minimal in the sense that they do not promise paradise. They do not eliminate conflict, error, or manipulation. But they sketch the outlines of a world in which rage bait is a recognizable pathology rather than a governing principle.

11.4 Final reflections on lucidity, responsibility, and refusal

Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Le Bon, Arendt, and Debord do not provide a joint program. They offer warnings, diagnoses, and images of failure more than clear prescriptions. Yet from their combined vantage point, three threads stand out for anyone living inside the rage-bait regime: lucidity, responsibility, and refusal.

Lucidity means naming the mechanism. It is the refusal to treat one's own reactions as simply spontaneous, or platforms as neutral mirrors of human nature. It is the awareness that when a particular kind of content reliably appears at the top of the feed, that is the result of layered structures: historical tendencies toward crowd formation, psychological cravings for moral superiority, political conditions of loneliness, and economic imperatives of the spectacle, all funneled through algorithms and metrics. Lucidity does not make one immune, but it interrupts the sense of inevitability. It opens a gap in which questions can be asked: Why this, and why now, and for whose benefit?

Responsibility, under these conditions, cannot be pure or total. No one can single-handedly dismantle the structures that make rage bait profitable. But responsibility can be distributed without being dissolved. It can mean, for ordinary users, a quiet discipline of not rewarding certain patterns, of resisting the urge to perform every indignation, of occasionally letting an outrage pass without amplification. It can mean, for professionals in media and technology, small acts of insubordination against the tyranny of engagement metrics, pushing for designs and policies that, even marginally, shift incentives away from permanent provocation. It can mean, for institutions, stubbornly upholding slower, more demanding practices even when they cost attention.

Refusal is the least dramatic and perhaps the most necessary act. It is not withdrawing from all public life, but saying no to specific roles in the machinery. No, I will not join this particular pile-on. No, I will not frame this story as pure scandal when it is more ambiguous. No, I will not design this feature to optimize exclusively for clicks knowing what that tends to produce. Such refusals rarely generate applause. They often happen in obscurity: in private moments of non-sharing, in internal meetings where alternative metrics are floated and rejected, in editorial decisions not to run the most incendiary angle. But taken together, they are the only way the attractor might be weakened.

There is a temptation, when faced with a system this large and self-reinforcing, to either despair or moralize. Despair says: nothing can be done, this is simply what modernity is. Moralism says: if people would just be better, the problem would vanish. The analyses drawn on in this paper suggest a third stance: sober recognition that rage bait arises from deep features of our shared world, coupled with a commitment to making those features less determinative than they might be.

The word “rage bait” gives us a handle on a cluster of phenomena that once lacked a precise name. Naming is not magic, but it matters. It allows us to point, to compare, to trace lineage, to ask whether what we are about to click or share is part of that mechanism. It allows us to recognize that we are not just victims of the attractor but, at times, its agents. And it allows us to imagine, however modestly, forms of life and infrastructures in which public feeling need not be forever trained on the next outrage.

To anticipate rage bait, as the title of this paper suggests, is not only to see that earlier thinkers already sketched its outlines. It is also to anticipate, in the simpler sense of “to meet in advance”: to step toward this mechanism with eyes open, before it has entirely set the terms of our attention. The task is not to exit the world, but to stay in it without letting a regime of permanent indignation define what it means to be awake, engaged, or alive to the times.

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